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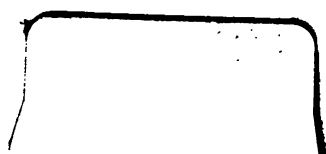
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# OLIVE TRACY

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BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

*Author of*

"Probable Sons," "Legend Led," etc.

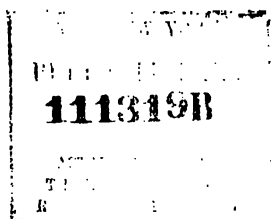
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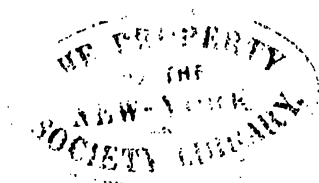
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# OLIVE TRACY

## CHAPTER I

### A "SPOILT" DAY

If it be my lot to crawl, I will crawl contentedly ; if to fly, I will fly with alacrity ; but as long as I can help it, I will never be unhappy.  
—*Sydney Smith.*

It was a sunshiny morning in early April. Outside : a quaint, old-fashioned garden, with a great deal of green turf and bright spring flowers bordering evergreen shrubberies ; inside : a low, long dining-room, with the breakfast table laid, and Olive Tracy standing at the open window, softly singing to herself, as she looked out on the dew-laden, sun-tipped lawn.

She was a tall, slight girl, with dark brown hair and Irish-blue eyes, eyes that seemed always full of hidden laughter, and a mouth with mischievous curves. Yet the face was a powerful one ; there was determination in the firmly moulded chin, thoughtfulness in the clear brow.

Clad in a fresh, cotton shirt and dark blue skirt, with a bunch of yellow daffodils in her belt, she was not an inapt personification of spring itself.

Her attitude, as she now raised her head to watch the soaring of a lark outside, bespoke eager hope and gladness. Life seemed at the moment very fair ; her young

veins throbbed with life, and the fresh, sweet world outside delighted her soul.

“Up with me! up with me into the clouds!  
For thy song, lark, is strong;  
Up with me! up with me into the clouds!  
Singing, singing.  
With all the heavens about thee ringing,  
Lift me, guide me till I find  
That spot which seems so to thy mind!”

She trilled the words out with careless joy, then started, as a bass voice near her echoed the last two lines.

“Good-morning, Olive.”

“Oh, how you startled me! Your Grace is not usually an early bird.”

She greeted the newcomer, who had crossed the lawn unseen, and now stood outside the open window, with a sunny smile, then invited him in. He swung himself over the low sash with the easy privilege of an old friend, and then standing with his back to the fireplace, he looked her up and down rather gravely.

“You are the first down?”

“That is a most original observation.”

He smiled, and his smile transformed his dark and somewhat rugged features. Tall and broad shouldered, with clear, honest, grey eyes, before which wrong-doers invariably quailed, Marmaduke Crofton could hardly be called a handsome man. “He is such a man!” was the highest praise ever offered him. And his mother was the only one who dared affirm that he had a “beautiful face.”

“I shall keep my news till the rest of the family make their appearance.”



"Is it good news?"

He looked at the spotless white cloth, the steaming silver urn, and the dainty breakfast service, with bowls of golden daffodils in the centre, and remarked :

"I think your breakfast is the nicest meal in the day."

"Shall I tell you why you think so? It is because you feel so virtuous when you arrive in time for it. They say that early risers are exasperatingly complacent and self-satisfied. But here is mother; we never wait for Elsie, so now for your news!"

A gentle, fragile old lady in widow's dress entered as her daughter spoke, and greeted the young man very warmly.

"This is like old times, Duke. Do you remember when you and Mark would come running up the garden on your way to school, and beg for a slice of bread and honey or a hot scone, saying you were half-starved at home?"

"You were always too good to us," said Marmaduke Crofton, a kindly gleam coming into his grey eyes. "Well, Mrs. Tracy, I passed the doctor's yesterday, and am off to town to-day to see about rejoining."

"Where is your battery now?"

"At Aldershot; but I am joining the —th at the Cape."

Olive looked up quickly.

"Is that your doing or that of the War Office?" she asked.

"Mine entirely. I am going to exchange with Perry, who wants to come home."

"I wonder at your going abroad with your father so infirm," said Mrs. Tracy gently. "Does Lady Crofton approve?"

"Yes, I think she does. The fact is, I shall be close

to Mark, and he has been at a low ebb lately, and the mother is anxious I should see him. We are only stationed twenty miles off from his diggings."

"Always Mark," murmured Olive.

There was a silence, which was broken by the entrance of Elsie Tracy, a fair-haired girl, two years younger than Olive. She looked a little discomposed at seeing a visitor.

"I do hate surprises in the morning," she said, as having wished good-morning, she took her seat at the foot of the table with a wrinkled brow.

"Elsie takes a long time to recover full consciousness," said Olive, looking at her sister quizzically. "She wakes gradually, and takes till noon to do it. The process is trying to all!"

"You need not try to bring me into conversation," Elsie remarked indifferently. "My ears are always busier than my tongue. Is there any news?"

"Duke is going abroad," Mrs. Tracy remarked; then turning to the young man, she said, "Are you sure you are quite well again? It would be serious if you had a return of fever when you got out there."

"I have never felt better in my life," was the hearty reply. "A change of air and scene will be good for me. I have never been to the Cape; it will be a new experience."

"And how long does the battery stay there?"

"It is quite uncertain. I believe there is trouble brewing out there."

"You will be coming back with a Kaffir wife," said Olive, with a little laugh.

Marmaduke made no reply, but met her mischievous

gaze with a grave and steady look ; a look which had the effect of making her hastily withdraw her eyes from his, and drop them in confusion upon her plate ; she took hold of the cream jug, then dropped it with a crash, and the snowy cloth was deluged at once.

Mrs. Tracy started and looked much annoyed.

"My dear Olive, how careless ! Ring the bell for Fanny. I do so much dislike clumsiness. What were you doing ? You are not generally so awkward !"

"I am always glad when Olive is a delinquent," observed Elsie quietly. "A mistake on her part I hail with delight, she is so self-assured and correct."

"I don't often make mistakes," Olive said cheerfully, "but when I do, I own it. I'm sorry mother, but the jug is not broken. What was I going to say ? Oh, I know—you must go up to Diogenes, your Grace !"

"Of course I will. How is he ? Same as usual, I suppose."

"Just the same."

They chatted away on different subjects, then Marmaduke left the room saying :

"I have only ten minutes to give the boy. Give me a call when they are up, Olive, will you ?"

As he closed the door behind him, Olive said impetuously :

"I cannot understand how Lady Crofton can do it. She thinks twice as much of Mark as of his Grace. The estate is being ruined by the mismanagement of that horrid agent they have, and there will be no one to keep a check upon him. His Grace could run down from Aldershot, but South Africa ! And his father slowly dying ! I call it positively heartless !"



"I am afraid Mark has been giving them a great deal of trouble lately," said Mrs. Tracy. "Lady Crofton told me as much when I last saw her. He is wanting a great deal of money, and I expect she wishes Duke to find out his exact position out there, and look after his affairs."

"Mark will always be Mark. I only hope he will not come home."

"Eddie is out of his clutches now," said Elsie, rising from the table, and jumping lightly out of the low window. "Do you want any flowers, Olive?"

"Yes—some for the drawing-room. Mother, I have heard from Eddie this morning. He says he is going to ask for a couple of days' leave next week."

"Is he coming home? Why, Olive, you are a long time in giving us the news. Dear boy! I haven't seen him for three months."

The glad curves left Olive's eyes and lips. She stood confronting her mother almost sternly.

"Mother, he ought not to come home. I am going to write and advise him not."

Mrs. Tracy seated herself in a low chair by the window, and held out her hand for the letter.

"What nonsense, Olive! You are always so severe with him—what does he say? Isn't his home the right place for him?"

"I can't think why he went into the army," Olive said, as she gave her mother the letter. "His one idea is to get away from his work."

She stood again at the window, but there was a little pucker between her eyes; then she looked at the clock, and leaving the room hastily, went out into a square dark hall.

"Time's up!" she called out in a clear, ringing voice. Marmaduke Crofton came down the stair two steps at a time.

"Come down to the bridge with me, will you?" he said.

Olive looked at him rather doubtfully.

"I shall hinder you."

"There is plenty of time."

She picked up a garden hat, and led the way out of a glass door down the sunny garden.

Elsie, picking jonquils on the lawn, nodded to them as they passed by.

Past the green turf and a row of old elm at the bottom, through a small iron gate, a winding path, a stile, and out into a buttercup meadow, Olive talking rapidly the while and not very sensible.

At last she looked up at her companion.

"You are glum, your Grace. How can you be on such a morning? It feels good to be alive on a day like this."

Then he looked down at her, and his voice was earnest and strong.

"Olive, six months ago I asked you a question, and you gave me an answer. You said this morning you seldom make mistakes. Is it a false hope of mine that you made one then?"

"Entirely false," said Olive, in a would-be cheerful tone, looking straight before her as she spoke. "We agreed then, if you remember, that we would still remain old friends. I have not broken that compact."

Marmaduke bit his dark moustache somewhat nervously.

"I am going away for a long time," he said, "or I would not plead again so soon."

They had reached an old stone bridge across the river. On the other side lay the high road, and Olive came to a standstill with determination imprinted on her features.

"I must go back," she said, with an unsteady laugh. "I have to do my housekeeping and order dinner. Good-bye. I have nothing different to say than what I said when last we touched upon this subject; and am sorry that you have chosen to refer to it again."

Marmaduke came to a halt, and squared his shoulders as if to brace himself afresh. Taking both her hands in his, he forced her to look at him, and resenting the action, she raised a very defiant and mocking little face."

"Olive, I do not believe you know your own heart."

"Thank you," she replied, dropping him a little curtsy. "I suppose it does seem wonderful that I should not appreciate such an offer. I am deeply grateful for the honour, but ——"

She got no further, for Marmaduke dropped her hands with a catch in his breath, raised his hat, and walked straight away from her without another word. She stood and watched his figure disappear, with mingled feelings of dismay and relief.

"Stupid fellow," she murmured to herself. "Why can't he take a 'no' as he ought? He has spoilt our last days together now, and has made me feel I have spoken brutally. Still he was distinctly aggravating to begin the old story again!"

She leant her arms on the old bridge, and gazed into the clear water below.

"He is such a pleasant friend and such an unpleasant lover. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I wish we could be boys and girls forever!"

She sighed, then retraced her steps through the meadow. There was a sweet smell of spring in the air, birds were carolling their hymns of jubilation and of love; in the meadow beyond, tiny white lambs frisked by the side of their solid imperturbable mothers, and a gentle breeze was encouraging the timid buds of green to unfold the young life within them, and blossom out in their sunny surroundings.

Yet somehow or other the joy and gladness of the spring morning seemed already gone to Olive. It was not till she reached the garden and was approaching the house that she gave herself a little impatient shake, and ran in with her usual laughing face. For the next half-hour she was busy in the kitchen and at her store cupboard. Then peeping into the morning-room, she saw her mother seated in her low chair reading the newspaper and Elsie at her davenport writing letters. With light feet she sped upstairs, and pushed open a door at the end of a long passage. It had been the schoolroom of the family, and still bore that name. Not a luxuriously furnished room, and yet a very cheery and comfortable one. A round table with a red cloth was in the centre and a cage with bullfinches upon it. Red curtains and a faded red carpet gave perhaps the appearance of warmth that seemed to pervade the room. Pictures of all sorts, sizes and shapes adorned the walls. A couple of glass bookcases in two recesses, an old piano, and a couch near the window—these were the principal articles of furniture; but on the couch, reclining against

cushions, lay a young lad, and it was to this couch that Olive made her way.

"Well, Diogenes, old boy, you have had an early visitor?"

The boy turned his head with a bright smile of welcome. His face was a remarkably sweet one: pale and oval, with close-cut brown hair and large hazel eyes, and a mouth that knew how to smile through suffering. Humour there was in every line of it; but something deeper and sweeter bore its impress on Osmond Tracy's features.

"Come along, Olly. Sit down; you are never busy, you know."

"Oh, never," said Olive, smiling and touching his brown head lightly with her hand. "Now, I will give you half an hour, and then I have to write an important letter."

"That is to Eddie, I bet," Osmond said quickly; "has the young beggar been worrying you again?"

"A nice way for a nephew to speak of his respected uncle!"

Olive drew up an old wicker chair to the couch as she spoke, and sank into its depths with a satisfied sigh.

Osmond changed the subject.

"I ought to feel low," he said reflectively; "it was like a bomb-shell when his Grace told me he was off to Africa next week. I don't believe he half likes it."

"Doesn't he?"

"Now, my dear girl, don't round your lips in that fashion. What has happened between you? Something has, I know, so out with it."

Olive shook her head with a little smile, and there was silence for a moment or two.

Then Osmond spoke.

"He has come to close quarters again?"

"Hush! It is no good talking about it. He has annoyed me extremely."

The boy looked at her sympathetically, then gazed out of the window beyond the garden, and his eyes rested on the old stone bridge in the distance.

"I saw you together, Olly, and I knew."

"He has spoilt my day," said Olive, brushing her hand quickly across her eyes, as tears were almost on the surface. "I came down this morning, Diogenes, delighted with myself and everybody. I felt I hadn't a care in the world, and then comes Eddie's letter. He must come home next week, he says, and it means that he must have money, and *that* I am determined he shall not have if I can help it. It is his ruination. Well—I would not let it depress me—I was singing away to keep my spirits up, and had just got myself back to my starting-point, when his Grace appeared with his bit of news. I could have borne that with equanimity, though of course we shall miss him—you most of all; but when he began again with his tragic tone and big eyes and masterful way, it really seemed the last straw. I was nasty to him, of course; and he walked off in high dudgeon, leaving me with the feeling that I have been to blame, and must try and patch up a truce when next we meet."

"I wish you cared for him," Osmond said gravely.

"He is a good friend, but will never be anything more to me."

"He is good all round," the boy said warmly; "a good son and a good brother would be certain to make a good husband."

"Too good for me. The only time I really like him is when he gets into a temper. He is human then."

"He never strikes me as being anything but human."

"He is getting 'goody,' Diogenes. I have had my suspicions for some time, and I believe you have been at him. I have a horror of religious officers. The clergy of course have a right to be so, but soldiers get so red hot over everything."

"You prefer one of Eddie's sort."

"Poor Eddie! But how irresistible he is! And how irresponsible!"

She laughed a little, then knitted her brows.

"No, Eddie is not radically bad. It was that villain Mark who gave him these extravagant tastes and taught him to care for horse racing and the like. I always feel that Eddie is a gentleman by nature, and will not do anything to disgrace us; which is more than can be said of Mark."

"Debt is not very ——"

"Honourable? Don't be afraid of speaking out. No, I know it is not, but men in cavalry regiments are pretty much alike in that way I believe, unless they are really wealthy. Of course, the mistake was in sending Eddie into the cavalry; and he treats the whole thing at present as a joke! His one idea is to get as much amusement out of the service as he can!"

Another silence, and then Osmond said brightly:

"Pitch into him when he comes, he always says that you do him good."

"Oh, yes, but what is the use of it? He makes me laugh, and then away goes all my wrath. I am really anxious about him. I told you that mother is continually selling out her capital. It doesn't make much difference to us now, but it will in the future, and Eddie has no right to take the money. He has a handsome allowance, and ought to find it sufficient."

Olive rose from her seat and paced the room. "Well," she said presently, with a clear brow, "I am not going to bother about it any more to-day. I shall write to him and beg him not to apply for more leave just yet. Colonel Holmes wrote very strongly to mother about him only last week, and if he were not away on leave himself, I know he would not grant it. Have you a fresh number of *Punch*, Diogenes? Let me have a look at it. We must laugh or else we die!"



## CHAPTER II

### “TRY TO FORGET ME”

Of all affliction taught a lover yet  
’Tis sure the hardest science to forget.—*Pop*

TWENTY years before, Mrs. Tracy’s husband had been Dean of Blackenbury. She had lived in the same quiet town ever since, and had brought up her family of five in an old-fashioned gabled cottage, just outside the town. Her eldest son and daughter had both married when very young. The son had gone into the Church; was offered a curacy in the north of England, and married his rector’s daughter within a year. The young couple were having a holiday tour the year after, when the most tragic incident occurred. They were upset on a coach trip, the curate killed instantaneously, and the young wife only lived for twenty-four hours, to give birth to a son, hopelessly delicate and crippled.

Mrs. Tracy took the little creature into her family at once. With care and attention the boy’s health wonderfully improved; but he was condemned to a couch for life, and only on rare occasions could he be lifted into a wheel chair and taken out of doors. He was blessed with undaunted courage and humour, and in spite of his isolation from the outside world, had learned to have wonderful sympathy and consideration for all with whom he came in contact. He was a receptacle for confidences of all kinds, and never abused his trust. His quaint, old-

fashioned sayings, his philosophical way of viewing life, had earned for him the sobriquet of "Diogenes," and though he was now only eighteen, his advice was generally followed by his young aunts, who were both devoted to him.

Mrs. Tracy's eldest daughter Lavinia, or Vinny as she was generally called, married a wealthy barrister when she was barely seventeen. The marriage had not turned out a happy one. She had no children to comfort her, and the caprices of an eccentric and fidgety husband, many years her senior, soured and embittered a naturally placid temper. Vinny's only pleasure was in coming home; but very seldom could this be arranged, and her husband disliked any of her relations visiting her.

Olive was the mainstay at home, the life of the house, and the support of her gentle, and perhaps rather weak-minded mother. She and Elsie were very different in temperament: Olive all fire and impatience, quick tempered, and tender hearted, yet hiding her depth and tenderness of feeling beneath a careless exterior; Elsie a sleepy, dreamy girl, slow in thought and movement, living her life alone, and spending much of her time in reading and in attending the cathedral services. She was more of a companion to her mother than Olive was.

Mrs. Tracy leaned upon Olive for advice and guidance, but went to Elsie with all her little confidences, feeling that Elsie had more sympathy and consideration for her weaknesses.

For Mrs. Tracy had two hobbies in her life, which made some people slightly impatient with her. One of these was "anniversaries."

Every death that had occurred in her family was remembered and mourned for on its anniversary; and each day, as it came round, was set apart for a day of grief.

When her daughters first came home fresh from their boarding-school, they tried in vain to turn their mother's thoughts into other channels.

"You make yourself and every one in the house miserable, mother," they protested. "Why need you do it? There can be no comfort in it."

But Mrs. Tracy would not be persuaded. She came down in the morning with tears near the surface. She spent most of the day in looking over packets of letters and papers belonging to the departed one. She attended the cathedral in the afternoon, and wept throughout the service, and by the time the day was over she was completely exhausted by her emotions. The following day she would be unable to rise, and her faithful maid, Margot, who had been with her for over thirty years, would have hard work in bringing back her spirits to their normal state.

Mrs. Tracy's other hobby was a more healthy and natural one. This was an intense desire to keep everything in the house spotlessly clean. No consideration was ever shown a maid who brought any silver or glass to table that was not shining as brightly as when first bought. A stain or spot on carpet or tablecloth was a real trouble to Mrs. Tracy. She spent much of her time in wandering over the house with a soft, silk duster in hand, which would be furtively brought to bear upon any article that seemed to have lost its gloss. Not a particle of dust ever escaped her keen blue

eyes. And though the result throughout the house was an extremely dainty freshness, it was obtained through the changing of many maids, and a loss of several good ones.

"Mistress was born an old maid," they would say to each other. "No one can stand her fidgety ways!"

Olive had hard work sometimes to preserve the peace, and Margot, a privileged servant of old standing, did not always help her.

Margot considered the world was indeed waxing very evil, and domestic service not what it was in her day. She had no toleration for the young, and her continual fault-finding in the kitchen was deeply resented. She had no very high opinion of Olive's housekeeping, and the only one of her mistress's children that she really cared for was Edmund, his mother's pride and darling. He could do no wrong in Margot's eyes. "Master Osmond is a dear, good, young gentleman, but a cripple. Mr. Edmund is as handsome and bold as his father, and is a true gentleman that will carry everything before him." Poor Eddie possessed his father's good looks and bearing, his mother's weakness and vacillation of character. Olive was quite right when she said he ought not to be in a cavalry regiment.

The Tracys had many friends, and amongst them one family with whom they were more than usually intimate.

Sir Marmaduke Crofton was a lifelong friend of the Dean's, and it was partly through his influence that the deanery of Blackenbury was offered to Canon Tracy. The young Croftons, Marmaduke and Mark, had been brought up from childhood in close companionship with the little Tracys; they had played together, had learned

together, and when they were girls and boys no longer, the old, familiar footing was still the same.

No two brothers could have had more widely different tastes. When quite a boy, Mark had longed for a seafaring life, and later on his parents bitterly regretted that they had so opposed his wishes. He grew up a restless, excitable youth, would not settle to any profession, and spent most of his time amongst grooms and jockeys. He was a good horseman, and that seemed his only accomplishment. From always being in the society of those beneath him in station, he adopted a swaggering, bullying tone that proved most offensive to his parents' friends. In an unfortunate hour Eddie, who had just left school and was studying at an army crammer's, was thrown across his path, and Mark had soon the most extraordinary influence over him. Eddie learned to race, bet and gamble, and having imbibed these and other vicious tastes he barely escaped plucking in his last exam. for Woolwich, and was now a constant source of anxiety to his family.

At last Mark got into serious trouble in a low gaming-house in the town, and his father in despair sent him off to the Cape, there to farm up country under the superintendence of a distant cousin. For some time he seemed to stick to his work, then came complaints from his cousin, and finally the news that Mark had left him, and started ostrich farming on his own account with two young fellows who did not bear the best of characters: since which time his only letters home had been to beg for money. Sir Marmaduke helped him to the best of his ability, but a sudden stroke of paralysis so enfeebled him in mind and body that all business arrangements

had to be conducted by his wife. And Lady Crofton found it hard to refuse Mark anything. He was her favourite son, though she would not allow it; and when at length she began to feel it impossible to continue to comply with his requests, she took Marmaduke into her confidence and together they arranged that he should go out to his battery there. Marmaduke had been at home some time on sick leave, for he had contracted a fever whilst on a trip abroad with a brother officer, and was long in shaking off the ill effects of it.

Consequently, finding the time hang heavily on his hands and not having much to interest him at home, he had been a constant visitor at the Tracys. Osmond had benefited much by his society. Marmaduke discovered that the boy was suffering from an interrupted and desultory education, bemoaning his lack of knowledge and yet hardly knowing how to remedy it. In spite of being a keen soldier, Marmaduke had scholarly tastes, and he commenced a course of reading with Osmond that was much enjoyed by both of them. The girls laughed at the "book worms," as they called them, but Olive, who had often deplored the scanty teaching that Osmond had received, encouraged the idea, and would often make a third in their literary conversations. She had always looked upon Marmaduke as a brother, and was very much perturbed when she first became aware that his feelings were widely different to hers. But hardly understanding the depths of those feelings after the first awakening, she had forbidden him ever to mention the subject again to her, and they had mutually agreed to go back to the old boy and girl friendship that had always existed between them.

It was a wet afternoon, and Osmond Tracy and the two girls were enjoying a merry chat over their tea in the schoolroom. Afternoon tea was generally brought there, and Osmond enjoyed the gathering as much as any one. Mrs. Tracy was resting in her room after a drive, and Margot had taken her a cup of tea there.

Olive was giving Osmond a laughable account of some visits she had been paying with her mother, and she was telling him in an injured tone of a conversation she had overheard unintentionally.

"I cannot get on with the eldest Miss Tracy," Norah Berry said plaintively; "she always looks as if she is laughing at you. I do dislike people that see hidden jokes in everything."—"Yes, she cannot talk sensibly; but, my dear, it only shows how vapid and shallow her mind is. It is the youngest Miss Tracy that has most in her. Don't you like her?"—"Ye—s, when she talks at all, but that is so seldom." So then I turned round, and they looked awfully foolish.

"What did you say?" asked Elsie.

"Oh, I laughed and walked away; it is good to hear opinions of oneself sometimes. You must live up to your reputation, Elsie. Your silence is worth its weight in gold."

Elsie was kneeling in the wicker-chair; her elbows upon the window ledge, and her gaze upon the dripping trees in the garden.

"I do hate social calls," she said dreamily; "and here every one knows your own business better than you do yourself. If I go out with mother she does all the talking. She always knows the right thing to say to everybody. Oh, how I loathe a country town! It is mere existence—stagnation—I am heartily sick of it."

She turned round with vehemence at the end of her speech.

Osmond looked at her critically.

"Wasting your sweetness on the desert air. Never mind, Elsie, you'll end by marrying some old city money-grubber, and he will give you a house in Belgravia. Why don't you ask Vinny to have you up for a visit and introduce you to some one who hates the country as much as you do?"

"Poor Vinny! Her one desire is to bury herself in the heart of the country, away from every sight and sound. It is a pity you can't change places; but people seldom find their circumstances suit them."

Olive spoke in a philosophical tone. She was seated at a low table drawn up to Osmond's couch, and was dispensing tea and hot buttered toast, with her usual cheerfulness.

"Life is a puzzle," said Osmond thoughtfully. "Every one with different needs, and those needs often stifled by force of circumstances."

"The doctors say, 'Life is according to the liver!'" said Olive flippantly.

"Oh, you can take life easily," said Elsie, a little impatiently; "you have no unfulfilled longings. I don't believe you have any longings at all."

"Perhaps I have not," said Olive, sipping her tea meditatively; "I take things as I find them, and if I don't like them, try to better them. I think that is my *rôle* in life, but I am not sure."

"I wish I could content myself with such an existence."

There was quiet scorn in Elsie's tone. The sisters



seldom agreed on any point, but it did not mar their affection for each other; which affection, though never demonstrative, was nevertheless very real and deep.

"Olly will have the happiest life," remarked Osmond.

"Why, Diogenes?"

"Because it isn't such a self-centred one as yours."

"Thank you," said Elsie lazily; "but I doubt that statement. Olive will wake up one day to find there are other things in life besides ordering dinners and mending table linen, and keeping a household in good order. Then she will wonder at her contentment in such a narrow sphere. It is only irresponsible, careless creatures like children and animals who have a happy life."

"Which heading do I come under?" asked Osmond, pulling a comical face of dismay.

"Oh, you! You needn't pretend that you are happy."

"No, I won't pretend."

"My dear Elsie," said Olive, in her most grandmotherly tone, "you are crude and immature in your statements. You are discontented and view things crookedly. Wait till real trouble comes upon you, then you will look back to these days and wonder you were so foolish!"

"What do you think makes a person happy?" asked Osmond.

"I've told you what I think already," said Olive decidedly. "My view is the doctors': Good health and good digestion."

"Being conscious that you are on the road to satisfaction," said Elsie.

"Well, now, I'll tell you my view, as I see it. Having a sure foundation!"

"I don't see how that applies."

"Well, look here, Elsie is a creature of circumstances, isn't she? And she always will be till she gets something in her life that will make her independent of them. Winds of adversity, storms of seething trouble will make shipwreck of any life, if it has not something to steady it beneath the wind and waves."

"Oh, you are getting into a preach, Diogenes," said Olive with a shake of her head. "Now, look at me. I am very happy without any foundation."

"Exactly," said Elsie. "You acknowledge that you are living a mere animal life. I wonder that you are not ashamed of yourself. Don't preach to me about being crude and immature."

Osmond lay back among his cushions with a wistful look on his fair young face.

"I wish a little breeze would have warned that fellow who had an insecure foundation to his house. It seems so awful not to wake up to your position till the final crash. And yet I suppose there isn't a living soul on earth that has not been warned again and again."

There was a little silence. Osmond went on in a low voice.

"It is so grand to feel that storms may come and storms may go, but nothing can wrench you from your anchor. No uncertainty, no upheaval; deep down, always the same, sure, certain rest."

"I'm not in want of rest at present," said Olive with her merry laugh; "I'm not tired enough."

"Nor I," said Elsie; "but not because of my present lot. It is too much rest. I want to move, to wake, to live!"

"Well, why don't you do it?" said Olive sharply. "I suppose you think it impossible to do anything but sleep at present. Now, here am I in the same circumstances and very wide awake—awake to my finger tips."

"You both want a shake," said Osmond smiling.

"Not I," responded Olive with a toss of her head.

"Yes, you especially; for you are on the sand, and you are building away happily and mechanically, without a thought for the future. You are choosing your materials well; your bricks and stones and mortar are almost without reproach; your mortar crumbles away occasionally, and a stone or two comes down, but those are accidents. You remedy them and go cheerfully on."

"You are sounding rather priggish," said Olive, putting down her cup of tea with a little clatter.

"And what am I doing?" asked Elsie, smiling at her sister's evident discomfiture.

"Oh, you are grumbling at your materials and looking at every one's site but your own: and waiting for a suitable site and a suitable day, and better bricks and bigger stones. You haven't begun to build at all yet."

"Thank you. And your tower of course is above the clouds already?"

"I'm afraid I haven't got beyond my foundation stone. Sometimes I hope I have, but I am a slow and faulty workman."

"Sum total," said Elsie, counting off on her fingers, "Diogenes has a foundation without a building, Olive a building without a foundation, and I have neither the one nor the other. As usual, I come off the worst in such statistics."

"May I come in?" asked a voice at the door.

"Why, it is his Grace!" exclaimed Osmond cheerily. "Come in, old chap. We did not hear you were back from town."

Marmaduke stepped in, nodded to the boy and shook hands with the girls, then sat on the end of Osmond's couch, and gave a little sigh of content as he did so. He was never so much at home anywhere as in this old schoolroom, and everything in it was dear to his eyes. It was already getting dusk; a small fire was flickering in the grate and softly touching Olive's hair with a ruddy glow. She was leaning back in her chair, with clasped hands behind her head, when he entered; but now she was rather nervously rattling the cups and saucers on the tea-tray and talking very hard as she did so.

"We began our tea in an easy-going, chatty style; we finished it in gloomy forebodings of the future, and a general feeling of insecurity all around. So we are relieved to see a fresh comer. Diogenes is in his most solemn mood at present." Then turning to Osmond she added with sparkling eyes: "Now talk to his Grace, and tell us about his building. Has he begun? What kind of materials is he using? Is he in want of a good storm to bring him with a crash to the ground? That is my fate, and I hope some else will share it, or perhaps he and Elsie are in the same position. They are so particular in what and how they build, that they will never begin at all!"

"We were giving each other our definition of a happy life," said Osmond. "Let us have his Grace's idea on the subject."

Marmaduke looked out from his dark corner upon the

fresh faces before him. He was tired in body and spirit, and now again in Olive's presence he felt it would have been better had he kept away. She seemed indifferent and unconscious of his feelings, but he was hungrily storing up in his mind every detail of her neat little figure and dress, every tone and laugh, the mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and the wilful curves to her lips, all to be brought out before his vision when the broad ocean rolled between them and he was thousands of miles away.

She still wore a bunch of daffodils in her belt; it was her favourite spring flower, and every now and then she fingered them lovingly. He glanced from her sunny brown head to Elsie's smooth fair one. Elsie was more strictly beautiful than her sister, her features were more regular, but she lacked the animation that was Olive's chief charm, and her face in repose was somewhat cold.

Osmond had once said to Marmaduke of the girls—"Olive's soul is more transparent than Elsie's, she is thinner skinned."

And he felt now that it was true, only he wished that Olive's soul would show some feeling for his departure, some of the wistful gravity that occasionally appeared when something or some one had excited her pity and sympathy.

"A happy life!" he repeated slowly. "It is a big subject. I should say it is when the inner life is adjusted so satisfactorily, that it gives one no trouble, and there is time and opportunity to spend the outer one for others."

"Oh," groaned Elsie, "worse and worse! You and Diogenes are a pair!"

"It is easy to compose a grand and noble definition,"

said Olive, "the dictionary will do that. I am thankful that I shall never be able to speak in such a superior bookish way. Let us change the subject. When do you sail, your Grace?"

"The day after to-morrow. I have only come home to say good-bye."

"We shall miss you awfully," Osmond said.

There was a little silence; then Elsie began to ask questions about the Cape, and Olive took advantage to slip quietly out of the room.

Half an hour later, she was waylaid in the hall by Marmaduke. She was bending over a lamp, and turning the wick up to give a brighter light, when she heard his voice close to her.

"Olive, I was ashamed of myself the other day. I had no right to worry you again. Will you assure me of your forgiveness before I go away?"

"What about?" said Olive in a careless tone. "Oh, I remember! You need not apologise, it is all right. Shall we see you again before you go?"

"No."

The word was abruptly spoken.

Olive had a soft duster in her hand, and she dusted her lamp, as if it had never been dusted before.

He stood in silence watching her; a man with twice the power and character of the young girl before him, yet feeling in her presence the greatest sense of inferiority and diffidence.

She turned at last, and there was a little defiance in her tone.

"You mustn't let us keep you longer; your mother will want every bit of your time that she can have."

"You will go and see her when I am gone, will you not? She is always so glad to see you, and she was saying you had not been lately."

"Lady Crofton and I are very good friends," said Olive, tucking her duster into a table drawer, with averted face. Then with a little effort she faced him, and held her head rather proudly as she put out her hand.

"Good-bye, and all good wishes for your voyage."

He took her hand and held it with a quickly caught breath.

"Give me one kind word, Olive, before we part?"

In a flash Olive seemed to see that this was no time for pretentious pride or reticence. Her whole face softened, the sweet wistful gravity that Marmaduke saw so seldom and loved so much, stole into her eyes, and the real true woman for one moment showed herself.

"You must try to forget me, Duke."

She rarely addressed him by his Christian name, always using the nickname he had received from her in early childhood.

It thrilled him now, through and through.

He raised her hand to his lips passionately and kissed it.

Then pulling himself together with an effort, he said huskily: "God bless and keep you, darling, and bring us together again one day. Auf wieder sehn!"

And then he went without another word, and Olive stood in the hall, dazed and bewildered at the sudden rush of feeling that swept into her heart and soul.

She crept up to her room, and opening the window watched him make his way down the garden and across

the meadows—the shortest cut to Crofton Court. Then the full realisation of what she had done came across her, and throwing herself down on her knees by her bed, she buried her face in her hands and burst into passionate weeping.

For Olive knew her own heart at last when too late, and she sobbed out in despair, "I do believe I love him after all!"



## CHAPTER III

### “BORN WITHOUT A BACKBONE”

And all men loved him for his modest grace  
And comeliness of figure and face.—*Longfellow.*

“WELL, mater, here is your scapegrace son! What! didn't you expect me? I wrote last week.”

“Yes, but I thought after what Olive said in her letter to you, that you might not come. I am very glad to see you, dear boy; you need not wish me to assure you of that!”

Eddie had marched in unexpectedly one afternoon when both his sisters were out. His mother welcomed him very warmly, but rather nervously. Only that morning Olive and she had been examining her banking account, and found that she had already overdrawn for the quarter. Mrs. Tracy had never been able to live within her means, and had lately been finding it more difficult than ever. Money had a way of slipping through her fingers in a most unaccountable fashion, but it never distressed her for long. It was only when she was forced to deny herself or her children anything, that it affected her usual placid demeanour.

As Eddie threw himself full length on the couch in the morning room, and turned his fair handsome face towards his mother, her heart smote her that she could not shower upon him all that he desired. Was there ever such a generous, affectionate boy? A boy who, in

spite of his great popularity in his regiment and in garrison society, was never so happy as when at home. His winning, confiding tones, his merry laugh, his careless indifference when in his home to anything outside it, his genial kindness to all below him in station; all these traits endeared him to those who knew him, and to his mother in particular.

At last came the usual question from Mrs. Tracy :

“How are you getting on in your regiment, Eddie?”

The boy laughed, and began tossing his signet ring into the air.

“Best not ask, mater. I’m an awfully unlucky fellow. I’m sure there isn’t a soul on earth that means better, and—and does worse! Old Holmes follows up his advantage of being a friend of the family by coming down on me like a sledge hammer on the slightest pretext. By the way, I must tell you a good story. I changed my servant about a couple of months ago, and I have a chap who worships the ground I tread on. I happened to get an act of injustice righted, of which he was the victim, and he’d go to the very d—— beg pardon——er——well he’d cut off his hand if I asked for it——that sort, you know. The other day old Holmes sent a summons for me; there were two or three of us having a game of whist together, and I was riled, so I turned on Giles—my servant, you know—‘Tell the colonel his last dose was too strong, and I can’t take another on top of it just yet.’ ‘Yessir,’ says Giles, and away he bolted. ‘He’ll repeat that in dead earnest,’ said one of the fellows, and I laughed, for I didn’t think he was quite a fool. Sure enough, the chap goes straight into the ante-room of the mess, where he finds the colonel.

Bobby Cray was there, and he told me Giles' mind mis-gave him when he met the colonel's eagle eye. 'A message from Mr. Tracy, sir.' 'Yes?' says old Holmes, looking as if he could eat him. Giles looks hot and perturbed. 'Please, sir, the physic you sent him didn't agree with him, sir, and he can't drink no more, sir, please at present, sir!'"

Mrs. Tracy looked quite scandalised, and her son chuckled.

"My dear Eddie, your colonel!"

"Well, was it my fault, mater? I walked into Giles well when I found him out, but, I can tell you, it's the latest joke in barracks, and my 'physic' has been down all the fellows' throats. Old Holmes had the gumption to let it pass. Don't you let on if I tell you, but he is dead nuts on Olive, and her brother gets some of her reflected glory, otherwise there might have been no end of a row."

"I think Olive rather likes him," said Mrs. Tracy meditatively. "And perhaps, if it did come to anything, it might be a good thing for you."

"It might, and it mightn't. I think I would rather the old fellow was kept in a bit of uncertainty and suspense. It makes him monstrous civil to me."

"I am glad," Mrs. Tracy said hesitatingly, "that you are getting on well. I was afraid from your letter ——"

Eddie made a comical grimace at her, then thrust his hand in his pocket and drew out a sheaf of bills.

"Just look at these! I thought I'd bring them to you in case you might be able to help me through any of them. The beggars won't wait, and threaten to ap-

peal to old Holmes. It is scandalous—the way they refuse to trust the word of a gentleman!"

Mrs. Tracy put on her glasses, and in an agitated manner took up some of the bills to look at them.

"My dear Eddie," she said, "these are dated two years ago, when first you joined your regiment. I thought we had settled all those; there must be some mistake."

Eddie shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say. Who can possibly remember that time off? If they haven't the gumption to get their money at the time they ought to, I can't help it."

"It is no use my looking at them," said Mrs. Tracy, with a little sigh, "for I have no money in hand. I can do nothing more this quarter."

Eddie's face fell, then it brightened.

"Look here, mater. This is the tip. You write a note to one or two of the nastiest of them and tell them you will be responsible, and will send them what is due within the next week or two. That will quiet them, I fancy."

Mrs. Tracy looked dubious; she knew better than her son that she was already behindhand with her own quarter's bills, but she had not the strength of mind to say so.

"You can leave them with me," she said at length, "and I will see what I can do."

Then she added nervously:

"You need not mention the matter to Olive."

Eddie laughed.

"Olive keeps the purse, does she? She ought to be the head of the family. Ah! talk of her, and here she comes!"

Olive came in, her hands full of primroses, and her face radiant.

"Oh, Eddie, you naughty boy! And I told you to stay away. How long have you been here?"

A little later and they were gathered in the school-room for tea, Mrs. Tracy in the most comfortable chair, her eyes glistening with pleasure as they rested on her son, and she listened to his light-hearted badinage. And then in the midst of much chatter the door opened, and "Lady Muriel" was announced. A sweet-faced girl with pale golden hair and delicate complexion presented herself, and was seized upon at once by Olive.

"Why, Dot! home again? When did you come?"

"Last night, and I'm so tired of being a tourist. What is Eddie doing here?"

"It isn't desertion," he responded, drawing up a chair with great deference to the newcomer, and seating himself as near her as he conveniently could.

"His colonel is away or he wouldn't have had leave," said Olive quietly.

Lady Muriel laughed.

"We are both in the same box. My father hurried back to some committee dinner in town, so I came off here at once. Mrs. Tracy, will you keep me to dinner? I am so dull at home."

"My dear Dot, you know we shall be delighted."

"And I will see you home," said Eddie, trying to restrain the eagerness in his tone.

"Thank you, but I told them to send the carriage if I did not turn up in time for dinner."

Eddie's face fell, and Elsie remarked in her slow way:

"Eddie thinks his society would fully compensate for a muddy walk of three miles through pitch dark lanes."

"Eddie is very good company," said Lady Muriel smiling.

"Yes, I really think I am," he replied modestly. "I would be ashamed of myself if I could not lead a lady's thoughts away from any outward inconveniences, and make her forget all but ——"

"My presence and personality," put in Osmond, a little drily.

Lady Muriel laughed, showing two bewitching dimples as she did so; but she turned the conversation, and Eddie, leaning back in his chair, never took his eyes off her.

It was an old story now. Lady Muriel had come to the neighbourhood when she was a fair, delicate child of thirteen, and Eddie, a schoolboy home for the holidays, two years her senior, had fallen desperately in love at first sight. Lord Bannister was a traveller and scholar. He lost his wife when his little daughter was nine years old, and he persisted in undertaking her education himself, for he would not let her out of his sight.

"Father," said the child one day as she sat surrounded by books in the library, and was being instructed in Egyptian history, "I read of these places, and I see them on paper maps; but I shall never remember anything you tell me about them till I have been to them myself, and touched them with my feet and hands."

Lord Bannister told an old friend of his that that was the happiest moment in his existence. "I knew then that we should be companions for life, and I said to her: 'Dot, we will start for Egypt to-morrow.'"

So Muriel's education was a joy instead of a torture, and being an intelligent child with keen observation and retentive memory, she proved, as her father anticipated, a delightful companion in all his travels. She learned the beauties of art in Italy, music took her to Germany, Paris gave her the true Parisian accent, and perhaps the grace and beauty in dress and manners that many a society woman envied. Yet, like her father, her heart was in the ancient past, and wandering through Palestine, Egypt and amongst all the ruined cities of Assyria and Babylon, gave her the keenest delight and satisfied her soul.

When she was nineteen her mother's relations interfered, and by dint of much exhortation and persuasion were the means of establishing the girl and her father at Blackenbury Manor.

For a time Lord Bannister's restless wanderings were stayed. He entertained and began to take interest in his county and in its sport. But it was not long before he carried off his daughter on a tour through the Rocky Mountains, and they had only just returned to the Manor. Eddie only saw his divinity at rare intervals, and perhaps the rarity of these added zest to his boyish devotion. Muriel herself laughed at him, but was a devoted admirer of Olive's, and the motherless girl never felt so truly at home as when she was under Mrs. Tracy's wing. She made few friends, but the friendships she made she kept, and the Tracys occupied a large place in her affections.

She stayed to dinner, and Eddie was the hero of the hour. Never had he shown such brilliancy in conversation, such aptitude in smart repartee and racy anecdotes.

When they adjourned to the drawing-room afterwards, he brought out an old banjo, and, having given them several regimental ditties, insisted upon every one contributing their share to the music. Olive sang, Elsie played the violin, and then Muriel was persuaded to sit down at the piano. Her playing was like herself, delicate, pure and sparkling, with fitful gleams of light and shade. She played on dreamily, and a hush seemed to fall upon the little group. When the last notes had died away, Eddie gave a sigh, then stood with his back to the fireplace and said thoughtfully :

"I feel quite wistful after good things now. Or, like some one I know, 'I have a yearning after the impossible, a vision of the mighty might be's!'"

"I wish your wistful yearnings would bear fruit," said Olive.

"I don't think it is his nature to yearn after anything," Elsie said in her calm matter of fact fashion.

"Say a kind word for me, Dot."

"Indeed, I will, for you have paid my poor playing a great compliment. To incite longings after something good is grand. Now you must do the something grander."

"Yes?"

"Reach the goal you aim at."

"But I'm afraid I have no aim."

"If you have discovered that, it is more than many have."

"And the summing up of Dot's sermon is :

"1st. Find out that you are aiming at nothing.

"2d. Aim at something.

"3d. Never rest short of success."



It was Elsie who spoke, and with a comical shrug of his shoulders Eddie said :

“ Do you know, Dot, I am sure I have the makings of a great man in my composition. Marks of genius are stamped upon my brow. Otherwise, why should every mortal creature I come across seize upon me as a good subject for their persuasions, their remonstrances, their lectures, their sermons! I am convinced they must say ‘ here is a youth who has the makings of a very bad man, or a very good one. There is nothing little or small in his nature. Intensity is impressed on every line of his features. To me it may be given to be the turning point in his existence, the pivot on which a world of unknown possibilities may revolve.’ And then of course their zest is fired, and they set to work. It is hard lines on the poor subject though ! ”

“ The ‘ subject ’ is getting too egotistical,” said Olive, and then the carriage came for Muriel, and she took her departure, Eddie accompanying her to the hall door with every attention.

Half an hour later Olive had retired to her bedroom. She was sitting on her low window seat gazing absently out into the still and darkened garden, when Eddie appeared at the door asking admittance. Olive drew herself together and made room for him at the window. She knew too well what this visit portended.

“ Come,” she said laughing, as she met his rather hesitating gaze; “ you and I never beat about the bush, Eddie, so make a clean breast of it. What is it you want ? ”

Eddie shook his head despondently as he sank into a cushioned wicker chair opposite her, and plunged his hands into his pockets.

"I'm certain I was born under an unlucky star. On my honour, Olive, I do my little best to get on like most of the other fellows, but I'm always down in my luck. I want a couple of hundred more per annum, and that's a fact."

"Well, I have heard all this before, come to the point. Is it your quarter's bills?"

"No, those are a small item; it is a—a debt of honour."

"Oh!" and Olive's tone was dry. "You have been gambling again. How much?"

"It would be a mere bagatelle to the other fellows," said Eddie a little nervously; "but I can't scrape it together. Only fifty pounds."

"Have you told mother?"

"No, I never worry her with this kind of thing; my small bills are bad enough."

Then Olive got up from her seat and paced the room with knitted brow. Eddie took out a cigarette, lit it, and put it into his mouth murmuring, "You don't object to smoke. It will sustain me, for I see I am in for a bad quarter of an hour."

At last Olive turned upon him with flashing eyes. She stood over him in her simple white evening dress, the row of pearls round her white throat rising and falling with the quick beating of her heart. She looked like a beautiful angel of judgment and wrath, and Eddie, though a little awed, audaciously muttered, "If Holmes could see you now, he'd give me a week's leave on the spot!"

"When is it going to stop?" she demanded. "Do you ever sit down and calmly face the future? Do you

realise that we are suffering now, and shall suffer still more by-and-by, for your extravagance and folly? Mother will give you her last penny, and you know it. Does it never shame you, that you, her only son, who should be her support and mainstay, are gradually reducing her, and all belonging to her, to poverty and destitution? You have an affection for your home, and yet you haven't the pluck and grit to economise, and relieve us of this perpetual strain and anxiety!"

"Nothing like hitting a poor beggar when he is down," said Eddie a little shamefacedly.

"But you are not down," said Olive impetuously; "I wish I could see you so. You take it all as a matter of course. You get into debt, and come running home to squeeze the morsey out of us, and carry all before you as carelessly and indifferently as if we were millionaires. You are a little bit ashamed of yourself now; but you will go back to barracks to-morrow with your fifty pounds in your pocket, and begin your gambling with fresh zeal. I dread to look forward to your future. You are a mere boy now. What will you be like ten or twenty years hence? Debt may lead you into worse crimes, and you will end by breaking mother's heart, and bringing ruin to yourself and the whole lot of us!"

Eddie rose from his seat impatiently.

"Oh, cut your preach short!" he said, "you know nothing of a soldier's life, or you wouldn't talk so! I own I am a bit of a fool, but I am not a criminal, and no worse than fifty other chaps. It was a crying shame to put me into the cavalry with such a mean allowance."

"Then be a man, pay up your debts, and come out of it. Go into the line."

.

"The line!"

Eddie's face was a picture of disgust. Then he said, with that winning frankness that his sister found so irresistible :

"Come, old girl, I'll admit I'm to blame. I don't know how it is, upon my honour, I don't, for I am sure my life is a constant struggle to keep my head above water. I think I was born without a backbone. You have told me so before, I believe; I wish you would give me an artificial one! There are times when I actually envy Osmond, poor chap, and think it would be a good thing if I broke my back out steeple-chasing. At all events, in that case if I were to become an encumbrance, I shouldn't be what you consider me now. Do you remember the Assyrian coming down like 'a wolf on the fold'? A picture of the hopeful son and heir, isn't it? You're a good hand at condemning, but you never point out a remedy. You fling my 'nature' in my teeth. Have you no stronger force that you can recommend to overcome it?"

"You have a will of your own," said Olive more gently. "Why don't you exercise it, and stamp out these expensive tastes before they get complete mastery over you?"

"I don't think I have a will of my own," said Eddie, the twinkle coming into his blue eyes. "I'm such a good-natured fellow that I give it away gratis to the first one who combats for it. I want to live at peace with every one."

"You have no speck of moral courage in your composition."

"What is that article? Define it."

"I won't be drawn into an argument. You know what I mean."

"Well," said Eddie, with a heavy yawn, "I can only say, in the old style, that I'll make a fresh start and do the best with the little that has been given me. A fellow with no pluck, no grit, no backbone, no moral courage and no money is heavily handicapped, I consider. Now, where is the fifty to come from? And then I'm off to bed."

There was a hopeless despondency in Eddie's tone that touched his sister's warm heart.

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"I don't mean half I say, Eddie, so cheer up! I believe in your truth and honour, only you are so young that I can't bear to see you drift on without any effort to save yourself."

"I'm a swimmer in a strong current," said Eddie; "it has got the better of me, and all you can do is to stand on the bank and tell me to make an effort. You don't fling me a rope or give me anything to catch hold of."

Olive looked at her brother in a puzzled way. He sometimes said things that were beyond her comprehension, and made her feel her helplessness in dealing with him. He laughed lightly as he caught her look.

"Never mind, old girl, I haven't gone under yet. I'll make another effort. The question is, Can you help me? If not, there is the money-lender."

Olive dreaded this suggestion above all others.

"I can help you this time," she said hastily, "but it will have to be the last. I have just fifty left from that hundred that came from my godmother. But Eddie, I

really mean it. You will ruin us all if you go on in this way. As it is, mother is selling out her capital, and what shall we do when it is gone?"

"Get married," said Eddie with an uncomfortable laugh.

Olive turned upon him scornfully, but he stopped her speech by a kiss.

"You're a trump, Olive. Now I am going to bed with the past in oblivion, and the future full of good resolutions."

He disappeared, and Olive sank down on her window seat again with a heavy sigh.

## CHAPTER IV

### A HUSBAND IS PART OF ONE'S SOUL

But I remained, whose hopes were dim,  
Whose life, whose thoughts were little worth,  
To wander on a darken'd earth,  
Where all things round me breathed of him.

—*In Memoriam.*

It was no new thing for Olive to spend some of the early night hours on her window seat in thought. With a laugh on her lips and a joyous ring in her voice she met all her difficulties and cares in the daytime, putting them resolutely aside till she had silence and leisure to dispose of them when the rest of the household was wrapped in sleep. Hers was not a morbid nature. She had described her mode of life very aptly, when she said that she took things as she found them; and if she did not like them she tried to better them. But it was this "trying to better them" that robbed her of her early sleep and brought fine wrinkles to her brow.

As Eddie closed the door behind him, she mused somewhat in this style :

"Well, he is settled now till next time, and I shall not trouble about him any more. It is lucky I have the money to give him, poor boy ! But it will be the last I can do. He is a strange mixture of fun and seriousness. I don't believe he is so irresponsible as he seems. What did he mean by a rope ? What is it he is needing that I cannot give him ? He made me feel almost helpless

when he talked so, for talk as I will, I can see no remedy for him! He lacks the grit to pull himself together; how can I give it to him? I suppose Diogenes would say religion would do it, but a boy's nature can't be altered, and I don't think religion has much effect on such characters as his. It is all right for Diogenes, but then his circumstances are so different. Religion is a good thing when you've nothing else, when all that one naturally cares for is swept away. And of course it is a splendid thing for him!"

She moved restlessly up and down the room; then opened the window, and her thoughts left Eddie and went to the one who was now on the sea.

She went over in thought every detail of his last visit, and a sentence of his that had haunted her, now flashed in full force across her mind. "A happy life: I should say—When the inner life is adjusted so satisfactorily that it gives one no trouble, and there is time and opportunity to spend the outer one for others."

"I wonder," she said to herself, as she leant her arms on the window sill and gazed out into the still moonlit garden; "I wonder what he meant by the 'inner life'? What is mine? I think I have plenty of time and opportunity to spend the outer one for others. That is my life at present, and I would not have it otherwise. I cannot imagine a life apart from mother and all her little worries; the servants; Eddie; keeping Elsie content; and managing all round. It keeps me busy and happy. I could not be without outside interests. Yet, if it should all be swept away from me, where should I be? My individual life, my ego—what is it like? Ah, I daren't think of it! It is a blank, except—one name



woven into my heart strings : I will not, must not, think of him. I have made a mistake which will be the mistake of my life if it is not righted. And can I hope it will be ? Oh, Duke, Duke, why did I send you away so ! ”

A quick, dry sob, and then resolutely the girl closed the window, and wished she could close her thoughts as easily.

In bed she buried her hot cheeks in her pillows.

“ I love him, I love him ; and I can never tell him so now.”

Sleep came to her, and with it the boon of forgetfulness.

Eddie went back to barracks ; his mother, aided by Olive, scraped and saved to satisfy some of his most urgent creditors, and life went on smoothly again. Yet Olive began to feel her little home worries chafe her spirit in a way that they never had before.

She came into the schoolroom one morning at twelve o'clock with hot cheeks and a ruffled air. “ Diogenes, I am struggling with circumstances this morning. Everything has gone wrong. So I am going to sit in your presence for ten whole minutes, at the end of which time I expect to find myself perfectly cured.”

“ There is nothing like talking one's troubles over,” said Osmond, closing a book which he was reading, and looking up with his usual bright smile.

“ To begin with, to-day is the twelfth, the anniversary of father's death.”

Osmond gave a low whistle of comprehension.

“ Of course, mother came down this morning in the deepest woe. She hasn't been very well the last few

days, and she looks a veritable ghost to-day. I tried to keep the breakfast table cheerful, but Elsie was like a lump of lead. Then mother stated her intention of driving to the cemetery this afternoon in our trap. I told her it was madness in this showery weather. There was a regular hailstorm an hour ago, and I urged her to have a close fly. She said she was sure it was because I did not want to drive her; that she must economise; and that she could not afford to hire a carriage for such a distance; she said we had no feeling, etc., and ended by leaving the table in tears, having hardly touched her breakfast. I went down to the kitchen; Fanny met me on the way and gave warning. She says she cannot stand Margot's interference any longer, and cook told me that Fanny was crying half the night, because she 'liked the family and wished to stay, but couldn't give satisfaction.' Mother scolded her yesterday for not keeping her brasses better, and Margot followed up the occasion, as she always does. I talked to Fanny and made her promise not to be so silly; then the butcher leaves a note with 'immediate' written on it. I couldn't disturb mother, so I opened it, and found it was for an immediate settlement of his account, as he was in money difficulties. I am sure his difficulties are nothing to ours, and it has been running on so long, that I know we owe him a pretty heavy amount."

"What have you done?" asked Osmond.

"Oh, I sent him a very polite reply, saying that mother was not very well, but I would refer the matter to her as soon as I could. I know there isn't a chance of our paying it for another month, if then!"

"I can't think," said Osmond gravely, "why we can-

not economise a little. There is nothing more wearing than perpetually living beyond one's income. Couldn't we take a smaller house, do with fewer servants, and cut off the pony and trap! Oh, if only I were not such an encumbrance!"

"Now, Diogenes, don't be so stupid! You know your £80 a year makes you anything but an encumbrance. If I had that income of my own, I should revel in my independence. No, try as much as I can, we cannot economise. Mother will not, so there is an end to it. And if it were not for Eddie we should have no need to do anything of the sort. We have wandered from the point. Where was I? Oh, I know! Well, I sent my note to the butcher; then came a message from Lady Crofton, who wishes me to go to see her this afternoon. I can't do it if I drive with mother, and Elsie won't go to the cemetery; she says she cannot stand it."

"Couldn't you go to Lady Crofton on the way back?"

"I'm afraid not, and I hate to disappoint her. It is the more tiresome because I'm convinced mother will get a thorough chill, and lay herself up this stormy weather."

"Well?"

"I think that is the end of my woes at present. They're not very great, are they?"

Olive was laughing now, and she turned to greet Elsie, who was entering the room with a scared face, rather mischievously:

"Come in, Mother Mumps," as Eddie would say, "What is the matter?"

"Mother has had a telegram."

"Well?"

"I don't know what it is. Margot and she are shut up together."

"You needn't think at once that it must be something dreadful. If it was, we should have been sent for. Ah, here is Margot; now we shall hear!"

"Mrs. Stanton is coming to stay for a bit," said Margot imperturbably.

"Vinny!" exclaimed Elsie, brightening up at once. "Oh, I am glad! When?"

"This afternoon. She hopes to arrive by the six train. The mistress says she cannot see her to-day, Miss Olive, so you must explain, and excuse her presence at the dinner table."

Margot disappeared, closing the door after her as suddenly and quietly as she had opened it.

"Margot gets grander in her speech every day," remarked Olive. "Well, I am glad the telegram is no worse. I always think of Eddie when one comes. Now I must be off to see to the spare room. Elsie, will you meet her? I shall hardly manage it. I do wish she hadn't chosen to-day to come."

Olive slipped out of the room, and Elsie seated herself on the low window seat by Osmond's couch. A pink colour had come into her cheeks; she leant out of the window, and picked a spray of jasmine and tucked it in her belt, humming a little air as she did so.

"I wonder," said Osmond meditatively, "why Vinny is coming so suddenly? When last we heard from her she said she was going abroad, and would not see us till the middle of summer."

"Perhaps Randolph is going off alone. He is so eccentric that one never knows what his plans may be. Oh, if I were Vinny, how differently I would use my chances!"

Elsie's tone was fierce with passion. Turning to Osmond she exclaimed: "How I hate my life! narrow, stilted, cramped, and she comes down here bewailing hers!"

"Well, what would you do if you were in her shoes?"

"I would fill my empty soul. I would begin to live."

It was not often that Elsie's sleepy exterior showed the passion that dwelt within. Osmond wisely showed no surprise, but drew her on.

"What would you fill your soul with?"

"With everything that Vinny scorns—music, art, society, literature. I would, as the Americans say, 'do' London, but I would not skim the surface. I would mix among all classes; I would be a unit in every clique. I would inhale and drink to intoxication of all that I could get. I would make friends with those I only hear of through the newspapers. I would listen and listen until I was able to take part in it all, and I would never rest till I was in the centre of an ever-moving, living, growing life."

"It sounds full," said Osmond quietly, "but it isn't full enough for an immortal soul."

"Oh, don't preach Diogenes! I know it would satisfy me. You say I haven't begun to 'build,' as you call it, yet. What can I build in this sleepy, little, cathedral town? It may sound conceited to say it, but I feel I have powers in me that are wasting. I cannot be content with these everlasting afternoon teas and

musical evenings, where every one says the same thing, and hasn't an idea outside their own little cathedral sphere. I sometimes almost wish to be a Dissenter to shock them."

"You talk of building. It is the old tale of being without straw, and yet told to make bricks. Now, you're looking very wise, so out with it."

"I was thinking that if circumstances may hinder building, no circumstances, however adverse they may be, can hinder the foundation stone being laid. That is ready made and complete in itself."

"Then what has to be done to it?"

"It needs to be put in its place."

"Diogenes, you go too far beneath the surface. I don't understand such things."

Elsie's eager, animated look died away; her emotions were spent, and perhaps ashamed of having given vent to them, she sank back into her usual impassive lethargy. Osmond wisely turned the subject, and if he had been shown a little glimpse of Elsie's inner life that morning, with the troubled depths below the surface, neither by word or sign did he reveal it to any one.

At two o'clock that afternoon Olive started with her mother in the pony trap for the cemetery. As Mrs. Tracy took her seat, Margot put into her lap an open basket with an exquisite wreath of lilies and maidenhair fern. Olive's quick eyes noted that it had been made by the most expensive florist in the town, and she sighed as she thought how impossible it seemed to economise. Yet, with her usual philosophical way of taking things, she chatted cheerily to her mother as they drove along, and would not allow that sad silence that Mrs. Tracy usually

adopted on such occasions. The sky above still looked dark and threatening; yet, as they gradually left the town and drove through sweet hawthorn-scented lanes, the air seemed to clear, and when they reached the cemetery gates the heavy clouds had rolled away and the sun was shining brightly. Leaving the trap in the charge of the porter at the lodge, Olive assisted her mother along the gravelled paths, passing rows of white tombstones and grassy mounds lying still and silent amongst the fresh, budding green around them. Olive was silent now. She was always peculiarly susceptible to the soothing influences of nature. She had no sad associations with her present surroundings. Her recollections of her father were vague and shadowy, for he had died when she was quite a tiny child. She noted the daisies springing up on the well-kept turf; the sweet, spring flowers planted by loving, sorrowing friends; and through the young, green foliage of the larches, laburnums and acacias, she caught a distant view of the winding river, with the wooded heights on the farther side. Her thoughts left her mother and fled to South Africa. Had he landed yet? Did Lady Crofton want to show her his first letter home? Would he come back with the same desire that he took away with him? Would he give her one more chance? If so, what would her answer be? The girl's soul thrilled within her as she tried to picture that scene. And then with a start she heard a low sob from her mother, and found that they had reached her father's grave, and Mrs. Tracy, having placed her wreath lovingly and reverently below the marble cross, was now looking at it with a tense, heart-breaking gaze.

Olive drew back a step or two; she almost felt as if she were an intruder, but she need not have feared, for Mrs. Tracy was perfectly oblivious of her presence.

She stood there, a gentle, fragile, little woman in widow's weeds, her hands tremblingly resting on the iron rail that enclosed the grave; the sun threw a soft, golden radiance on her grey hair and sweet, tear-dimmed eyes, and she murmured over to herself the words underneath the cross :

Until the day break and the shadows flee away.

As Olive looked at her a sudden wave of sympathy and pity swept over her.

"Mother," she said gently, "I never knew him, I wish I had."

Mrs. Tracy looked at her daughter, standing there in the spring of her glad youth and beauty, and then she laid her hand on her arm.

"Olive," she said in calm, hushed tones, "it is not only himself that lies here, but the best part of me."

Olive was silent. The experience of her own heart was teaching her to understand her mother better now than she had ever done before.

Mrs. Tracy's voice trembled with suppressed feeling as she went on :

"Not one of my children remember him, most of his contemporaries have passed away, and the few who are left have forgotten his existence. I only live on—daughters may be a comfort, sons a support, but a husband is part of one's soul. My life and his were one, and are one still forever. Only part of me has lived since he left me, but it will not always be so."



She raised her eyes to the blue sky above her, and added under her breath, as a light seemed to break over her face "In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ." And then silently they came away.

## CHAPTER V

### THE "ONLY CONTENTED ONE IN THE FAMILY"

Discontent is the want of self-reliance ; it is infirmity of will.  
—*Emerson.*

MRS. TRACY went to her room upon her return and had a cup of tea ; then Olive saw to her dismay that she was bent on going to the cathedral service at five. She tried in vain to dissuade her, but finding that quite impossible, she asked Margot to go with her ; and came in to see Osmond, saying desperately : " I really believe mother does her best to kill herself on such days as these ! It isn't fair on us, but she won't hear a word."

" Are you coming to stay ?" said Osmond with a wistful look in his eyes, that Olive did not see. " I haven't seen any of you since the morning. Elsie is quite excited at Vinny's arrival, so she has made herself scarce."

Olive looked at her watch.

" I am thinking that I will just run over, and see Lady Crofton. I shall have time if I go at once. Vinny will not be here till half past six."

" Cut along, then, and find out all you can about his Grace. He has never written to me yet !"

Osmond's voice was cheery, but when Olive had disappeared, he gave a little sigh. He had been having one of his bad days, when his pain was severe ; and a headache in addition prevented him from forgetting his loneliness in reading.

Never complaining, the girls did not realise how much their society was appreciated by him ; and though there were few days that did not see one of them in the school-room, there were many long, lonely hours to be got through by the invalid. He lay now watching Olive running down the garden, and through the meadows to the old stone bridge. And as he watched her, he said to himself with a little smile :

“She is never too tired or too busy to go to the Croftons.”

Olive slackened her pace when she reached the high road ; five minutes walk brought her to the heavy iron gates, and the long beech avenue that led up to Crofton Court. She knew every inch of the way, and when she came to the old Tudor mansion, she walked in at the front entrance through the open glass doors that were never locked, as if she were one of the family. At the further end of the hall she met the butler.

“Is Lady Crofton in the drawing-room, Triggs ? ”

“Yes, miss, she was hoping to see you to tea.”

Olive sped up a low flight of broad stairs, and pushed open a door directly opposite her. The air as she entered, seemed full of the scent of hot-house flowers. Two large tubs of pink and white azalias stood in a deep bay window : genistas, ferns, and arum lilies were grouped together in another recess, and flowers of all varieties and hue were scattered over the room. Lady Crofton, a tall, thin, and rather stately woman, sat in an easy chair by her afternoon tea table, and now looked up with a smile of welcome at Olive.

“My dear, I had almost given you up.”

Olive bent down her face to be kissed.

"Yes," she said brightly; "and I almost sent a note to say I couldn't come. I have been to the cemetery with mother this afternoon, and Vinny is coming to us to-day; so there has been a lot to do."

"One of your mother's anniversaries?"

"Yes, my father's."

Lady Crofton checked the slight smile that had come to her lips.

"Ah, my dear Olive; there never was such a devoted couple as your parents! I used to wonder whether one could ever survive the other. Now sit down, I thought you would like my news from the Cape."

"Yes, indeed, I should," said Olive frankly, though a faint blush rose to her cheeks, which Lady Crofton's keen eyes detected at once with some amusement.

"It is good news. Duke has met Mark, and he says he is steadying down again. It is such a relief to my mind. There seems to be rather a nice English family living near Mark, and Duke is quite taken with them. He says they are such a boon to Mark. They come from Northumberland. Corderoy is the name, but I hardly think they are a county family. Still, I have such a horror at colonials that I feel thankful Mark has such neighbours. I always think a family life so good for a young man. And Duke says the girls are well educated and perfect ladies. I always consider that Duke has fastidious tastes, so I am quite satisfied if he is. I will read you his letter. Dear me, it is getting quite dusk already. Will you read it for me?"

Olive gladly assented. She took herself to task afterwards for the foolish pleasure she felt in handling the thin foreign sheet of paper with the clear open

handwriting that was so familiar to her. It was a pleasant, chatty letter, and towards the end he wrote :

I am full of work. The country seems in a most unsettled state, and people wonder out here if England has at all grasped the true state of things. I should not be a bit surprised if we have war before the year is out. Optimists have great hopes of the coming conference at Bloemfontein, but wiseacres here shake their heads and say Kruger means war. This is the first letter I have written since we landed. If you see any of the Tracys, you might let Osmond hear of my whereabouts. I shall write to him by the next mail.

"Osmond occupies a large place in his affections," said Lady Crofton smiling; "whenever he was long away from us it was always Osmond I found had been the attraction!"

"He was very good to him," said Olive handing back the letter, and trying to speak indifferently. "I am sure Osmond misses him dreadfully since he has gone."

"And no one else?"

Olive's head was held up proudly.

"I think we all miss him, Lady Crofton, but Osmond, of course, most of all."

Lady Crofton looked at the girl with a little shake of the head. Then she said, meditatively: "I don't want them both to marry out at the Cape. Duke seems so unusually taken with the Misses Corderoys' attractions that I wonder whether it is as much on his own account as on Mark's that he is so pleased to have them as neighbours. I should like Mark to marry, it will steady him; but there is plenty of time for Duke. I should like him to choose a wife nearer home."

"How is Sir Marmaduke?" asked Olive.

"A little better to-day. You must see him before you go. The doctor told me this morning that he may live on for years. And I really think his speech is improving. I can understand every word he says."

They chatted on, and once off rather critical ground, Olive recovered her spirits. She taught Lady Crofton a new stitch in knitting, read her an article from *The Times*, and then went into an adjoining room to see Sir Marma-duce. He looked very feeble in his wheel-chair, but gave Olive a warm welcome and made her sit down and read his son's letter again to him. He had a keen sense of humour, and was not unlike his eldest son in appearance. He still preserved his uprightness of carriage, and it was only when he spoke that people recognised that he had had a stroke of paralysis.

"So we have sent the eldest son after the prodigal," he said with twinkling eyes. "It is a new version of the old story, but I would rather Mark's brother did the clothing and feeding out there, than that the father should have to do it at home."

"I don't think Mark has come to that," said Olive.

"He is a thorough bad lot, that is my experience of him, and I know him rather intimately."

"I expect he will do better now that Duke is within reach of him."

The old man shook his head.

"He will never do well. It was born in him. How is your young scapegrace?"

"Oh, Eddie is very well," said Olive, who always tried to hide her brother's delinquencies from all their friends.

"An idle young dog, Holmes calls him. Holmes was

here dining last week. He walks into your brother sometimes, I fancy."

Olive deftly changed the subject ; and soon after took her leave. She hastened home, and had not been in five minutes before Vinny arrived. Mrs. Tracy had returned from the evening service and gone straight to bed. Margot informed Olive that she was "completely exhausted by the violence of her emotions." And Olive explained this as well as she could to her eldest sister, who looked rather blank at the absence of her mother.

They gathered round the drawing-room fire before dinner was announced, feeling a little forlorn ; but Olive did her best to dispel this feeling, and Vinny said with a smile and sigh :

"You never grow a day older, Olive ; just the same old rattle-pate !"

Vinny herself was the beauty of the family. Tall and graceful, with a proud poise of her head, and a low, sweet voice, she would have attracted attention in any crowd. Her hair was a soft golden brown, which rippled off her broad white brow and clustered in tiny ringlets wherever it could get a chance. A clear, fair complexion, Grecian nose, and delicately cut features belonged to Vinny, also a pair of the softest, saddest brown eyes that were ever owned by a human being. Her manner was always gracious, but very slightly bored ; and she looked as if life to her was a thing to put up with, and not in any instance to be enjoyed.

Elsie looked up to Vinny with a mixture of admiration and impatience. She was talkative now, and her tones were eager.

"Now, Vinny, tell us the latest. We see a Londoner so seldom."

"The latest in what?"

"In fashions, in new songs, new books, new crazes, new stars in society—oh, everything that is going on while we sleep away our lives down here."

"I wish I knew of anything really new," said Vinny, with a curl of her lips. "I have reached Solomon's experience, that 'there is nothing new under the sun.'"

"Oh, that is because you have been surfeited on the fat of the land. I only wish I could share a little of it."

Vinny looked at her young sister rather wistfully.

"I only wish you could Elsie, but it is of no use my asking Randolph. I told him the other day it is a farce to have a spare room; he has such an objection to guests."

"And why are you not abroad?" asked Elsie suddenly.

"It is put off for three weeks. Randolph has gone into the country on some business, so I thought I would come home and get a whiff of sweet spring air and sunshine. The parks in town always make me homesick in spring."

Elsie gave a short little laugh.

"I'm the only contented one in the family," said Olive, with a virtuous air; "Elsie lives in the country and pines to be in town; Vinny lives in town and pines for the country."

"Life is stagnation in the country," said Elsie with a frown.



"Life is an empty farce in town," said Vinny in her low, sweet voice. "Of course," she added, "Elsie and I only speak from our own standpoints; there are people who can live in the country without stagnating. I know I could. There are some in town to whom 'life is real, life is earnest,' but I never meet them."

"Oh, how can you talk so!" exclaimed Elsie. "You meet people every day of your life who I would give all I possess to see. Authors, statesmen, poets, artists, any one and every one who has done something to make themselves of note."

"Yes, but how do I meet them? My experience is that the ones most worth knowing shun the haunts of society, or if they come, treat women of fashion as if they had no souls. Some of the most clever writers are the dullest conversationalists; artists and poets are absolutely bad-mannered; they think their forte is to be eccentric, and eccentric is to be what most people in society are not. The pets in society are generally self-made men, whose heads get turned by their position, or else it is those who have money and titles to recommend them without an ordinary supply of brains."

"Oh, yes, I know you think London society is rotten to the core. I only wish I could get into it, I don't think I should find it so."

"It is talk, talk, talk," said Vinny, a little bitterly; "people talk themselves and their friends threadbare to keep up a flow of conversation. Do you know what I long sometimes to do when I look round one of these crushes and hear bits of society talk, and realise that all the roomful is saying the same kind of things in different phraseology? I long for a deep and profound silence;

for every man and woman in the room to be made to think. A half-hour of meditation! That is one thing we never give ourselves. 'I'm not made for thinking,' a young fellow said to me one day, when I said something of this sort to him, 'that is why I went into the army. I assure you,' he went on, 'I get ill if I cannot talk to anybody. My nature is confiding. I cannot live alone, and if you were to condemn me to silence, I—I—should go to sleep!'"

Olive laughed, but Elsie knitted her brows, and Vinny began to talk of home matters.

"I feel," she said, after dinner was over and they had come back to the drawing-room, "that the stillness and quiet inside and out is making me a new woman already. Will you have me for three weeks, girls? I can stay."

"Of course we will. Mother will be delighted. Margot was a little afraid you would bring your maid with you; she fought her last time, do you remember?"

"Yes, I gave Hawkins a holiday. I want to imagine myself one of you girls again if I can."

She went up to see Osmond before she retired for the night, and then drew Olive into her room with her.

"I want to talk to you," she said.

"You have never stopped doing that since you entered the house," said Olive laughing. "You want your hair brushed, and that is the fact."

Vinny smiled, and was not averse to this suggestion. She took off her satin dress, slipped a crimson wrapper round her, and then shaking her lovely hair impatiently over her shoulders, let Olive act as her maid.

"I really want to ask about Eddie," she said. "I have been thinking so much about him lately, and wish

I could help him. Is he still finding his allowance insufficient?"

"My dear Vinny," said Olive, putting a little extra energy into her brushing, "if he had a thousand a year he would still be in difficulties."

"I find it so difficult," Vinny said despondently, "not having any settled allowance of my own. Randolph will keep such a tight hand over my private expenditure. He does not mind how much my dressmaker's bill is, nor the cost of the most reckless housekeeping; but when it comes to charities, or to helping any other living creature outside our household, he is like adamant. I have to account to him for every penny I spend."

"I wouldn't stand it," said Olive, with flashing eyes. "It is bondage. He has no right to treat you so."

"It is his money, not mine. I think it is not right to let a girl marry without a penny from her own family. I have not been so fortunate as some of you. Look at Osmond! He has nearly £100 a year left him by his godfather. I wish I had it. You had £100 last year from Aunt Jane, had you not?"

"Yes," said Olive quietly; "it has been most useful."

"Well, I don't mean to grumble," said Vinny. "I know, as far as my own personal tastes go, I have more than I need. But mother always seems so straitened now; and I cannot help any of you."

"Eddie is best not helped," said Olive. "I am glad he knows that every sum he gets out of us entails some sacrifice on our part. He has the grace to be ashamed of himself sometimes."

"Does Colonel Holmes often come here?" asked Vinny.

"No. Since his home was broken up and Mrs. Holmes lives with her sister, his visits are few and far between. He was dining the other night with the Croftons, but he did not come to us."

"I always thought that a false step on mother's part, getting Eddie into his regiment. A man told me the other day it was one of the most go-ahead ones in the service."

"So it seems, as far as Eddie is concerned."

"Colonel Holmes is a nice fellow, is he not? He used to be a great friend of yours, Olive. Do you remember when he boxed Duke's ears for his impudence in the meadow over carrying your school books?"

Olive laughed, but there was a sudden flush in her cheeks that Vinny observed in the glass in front of her.

"Which did you favor then?" Vinny continued; "Duke, wasn't it? When Colonel Holmes went to Woolwich he got a little too grand for us. I hear Duke is at the Cape. Do you hear from him?"

"Me! Why should I? Osmond is his friend.

Vinny turned round and drew Olive in front of her.

"Child, your cheeks tell tales. What has happened between you? Elsie tells me she is sure something has. Six months ago Duke told me he could not live without you. Don't you like him?"

Olive drew her hands out of her sister's clasp.

"Don't mind my cheeks," she said a little unsteadily. "He asked twice and I refused him twice, and that is the end of it. There! Your hair is done. Good-night!"

## CHAPTER VI

### SHAKEN

What can we do, o'er whom the unbeholden  
Hangs in night which we cannot cope ?

—*F. W. H. Myers.*

VINNY brought a certain amount of stir into the quiet household. She might talk slightly of London society, and of her town life ; but she was a well-read, cultured woman, and was able to give Elsie much information about the world of letters, and of art, which delighted her heart. Mrs. Tracy enjoyed her visit. She drove out with her every afternoon, and appealed to her on every subject, till Olive declared, laughingly, that her light was put out and she must retire into the background. She certainly found more leisure to attend to her own affairs now that her eldest sister engrossed so much of her mother's time and attention. Mrs. Tracy seemed unusually bright and interested : she came to Olive one morning and announced her intention of giving a small dinner party in honour of Vinny, and when Olive demurred a little at the expense it would entail, she was promptly crushed.

"My dear, we are not so badly off that we cannot afford to give a quiet dinner to our friends. I will ask Lady Crofton, and Dot and her father, and Colonel Holmes, and the dean and his wife. Perhaps we had better ask two more gentlemen. The two unmarried canons—how many will that make ?"

"Twelve with ourselves," said Olive.

"That will do nicely, and I will write the invitations myself. I think we might say next Thursday week."

"All right, mother; only don't you trouble about sending the invitations out. I can do them."

"I shall like to send them myself, dear. I will do it now."

Mrs. Tracy had been walking up and down the dining room as she talked. Vinny and Elsie were out. They had gone primrose hunting in the lanes near; and Olive, though longing to be with them, had stayed at home to write letters for her mother. She went with her now into her morning-room, and saw her comfortably settled at her davenport. Just as she was leaving the room, Mrs. Tracy called her back.

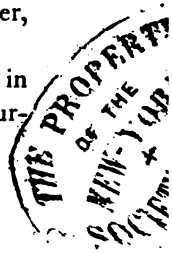
"Olive, I think on second thoughts I will answer that letter of Eddie's myself. I have not written to him lately."

"Very well, but don't tire yourself over it; and don't promise to send him any more money, mother!"

Olive placed Eddie's letter on the davenport, then bent down and gave her mother a kiss before she left her. She was not usually demonstrative, but something in her mother's face that morning drew out her affection towards her. All her life long, she was thankful she had given her that kiss. Mrs. Tracy gave a little sigh, as she dipped her pen into the ink, and commenced her letter to her absent boy.

"Olive is a dear good girl, but she is not his mother, and she does not understand him as I do!"

Then her eyes wandered out of the open window, in front of her to the sunny garden beyond. The labour-



nums and lilacs were in full bloom ; and the spring bulbs round the shrubberies gave a very bright look to the old garden. Her thoughts wandered from the present to the past. The dean had been so fond of spring ; he had asked for a pot of primroses to be put near him before he died. "Lucy, they speak to me of the new spring dawning for me in the other world. How wonderful it will be to taste the spring of youth again, when this tired worn-out body will be laid aside."

And as she thought upon this, a silent unseen visitor entered the room and approached her. She took her pen up, with the words upon her lips, "He is so like his father, he only needs more steadiness and application." And then she wrote :

MY DEAREST BOY,

I must just send you a line to-day, to say I have received yours, and am so glad you won the race yesterday. I cannot help feeling anxious about these steeple-chases, but I hope you will be prudent. I wish you could get leave to come over to a small dinner party I am giving. I am going to ask your Colonel, as I have not seen him for a long time. Vinny is here, and enjoying herself much. I am feeling much stronger than I have been lately —

Then very softly, very gently did the silent visitor lay his hand on the widowed mother. She bent her head over her letter ; the pen dropped from her grasp ; a little fluttering sigh ; and then a stillness fell on that sunny morning room, and on the writer in it. A chaffinch outside perched on the window-ledge, and looked with quick inquiring eyes at the scene within ; a sunbeam found its way to that bowed head and touched it with a golden radiance ; and still no one came to disturb the solemn silence that reigned. The gardener outside whistled a cheery tune as he mowed the turf with the lawn cutter ;

Olive in her bedroom above was singing happily to herself as she moved here and there; and the maids' chatter in the kitchen was wafted into the garden through the open window. Sunshine indoors and out; for was not spring in its loveliest garb on this May day? And the hearts of all were affected by it.

And the spring that the dean had talked of had come at last to the one who had found most of the year grey and autumnal.

When Olive entered the room a short time afterwards, she raised a cry that brought most of the household, in fear and trembling, to her side. A doctor was sent for, but nothing could be done, and when Vinny and Elsie returned with their primroses, it was to find themselves motherless.

"Failure of the heart's action," was the doctor's verdict, but though for a long time her daughters had known that Mrs. Tracy's heart was weak, her sudden death stunned and paralysed them.

Olive found in the dark days that followed the help and comfort of having Vinny with her. Elsie shut herself up into her room; Olive still had to arrange everything and manage the household. Eddie came home, sobered and saddened by his loss, but was not able to give his sisters much help, and went back to his regiment immediately after the funeral. All of them marvelled at Olive's composure. She still maintained her cheery voice and demeanour, and if she did not offer comfort in words to her sisters she looked after their bodily comforts in a way that no one else did. Osmond was the only one who noted something missing in her looks and tones, and he quietly waited his time.



It was a sad little gathering that assembled with the family lawyer in the dining-room after their return from the cemetery. Mrs. Tracy's will was read, and Olive's worst fears were realised. A great part of her mother's income came from an annuity which expired at her death. Mrs. Tracy left Eddie a sum which would still bring him in the amount he had been accustomed to receive from her quarterly. The rest of her capital was to be divided between her unmarried daughters. And this, when several large debts had been paid, would give them the pitiful income of £150 between them. Elsie hardly grasped it at first, but Vinny was loud in her lamentations on their account. Eddie, rather hesitatingly, offered to forego some of his allowance; but neither of his sisters would hear of this, as he insinuated it would entail his leaving the service. And Olive closed the discussion by saying: "We will not go into the ways and means to-day. We have been told what we may expect, so the only thing to do is to make the best of it."

That same evening, when Eddie had left them, she stole up to the schoolroom, leaving Vinny and Elsie talking together in the drawing-room. She took her favourite seat by the window in silence.

"You are tired," Osmond said presently; "this has been a trying day."

"Yes," assented Olive absently.

Osmond waited for her to speak again.

And after another long silence she suddenly turned round:

"I don't think I believe in anything, Diogenes."

"Since when?"

Olive gave a little shiver, then spoke rapidly :

“It is awful ! This day week mother was well and happy. Now, where is she ? It is dreadful—terrible ! I can’t express what I feel. I lie awake at night and think of it. I never imagined death would be so awful ; it is such a cruel power. I have never felt my own insignificance and utter helplessness so before. I never took in that people could slip out of this life so suddenly, and then be never heard of or seen again. I wonder we can any of us go on living with something so awful as death in our midst. You may slip away to-morrow—I may, all of us ! It seems as if we’re just puppets of fate, and the outside world smiles and goes on as if nothing had happened. I can’t believe mother is dead ; I can’t believe that her personality is so swiftly annihilated. There is nothing but terrible silence and hopeless conjecture. How do people live on after death has come into their family ! I can’t conceive getting reconciled to the idea of it. It is an upheaval of everything ; there is no light, no comprehension, no hope, no sign of assurance that she is anywhere. Oh, it is too awful. I almost wish I was not in existence. We are entirely in the dark, and I want to *know !*”

It was a passionate outburst, and her face was strained and white.

Osmond said nothing for a few minutes, then very slowly he spoke :

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable !”

“Now you are quoting the Bible ! I have no hope in that or anything else. Everything seems taken away. I suppose I have lived taking things for granted, and I

have been awakened with a shock! Look at me now, Diogenes!"

The girl sprang to her feet, standing with head uplifted, and outstretched hands; a flush of excitement coming to her cheeks, and a defiant glow into her eyes.

"I am alive, every inch of me!" she exclaimed. "From my finger tips, I feel I am! Yet suddenly against my will, unwarned, I may slip away to nothing, and your one idea will be to get rid of my body! It makes me frightened to live! I may smother my feelings—I must to keep things going—but these are not pleasant thoughts, and I can't get rid of them. I have always tried to make the best of things through life; I can't make the best of this! It is inhuman! awful! It is like a bottomless pit suddenly opening just under your feet! I am terrified, and cowed by it. And it is the inevitable, only a question of time, and then my turn will come—yours—every one's!"

"You feel as if you have no foundations under your feet!"

"Yes, everything is slipping away."

"But a little time ago, you told me you were very happy without any foundation. Do you remember our talk about it?"

"Yes, you said I had nothing to hold on to when storms came, and I haven't, I own to you I haven't! Tell me honestly, Osmond, without any cant or humbug, have you?"

"You must forgive me quoting again—'For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'"

“‘We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.’

“I believe this from the bottom of my heart, and so did your mother.”

The emphasis and steadfast assurance in Osmond’s tone made Olive look at him rather awed.

“And what are your grounds for believing it?” she asked breathlessly. “Don’t be shocked at me; I want to get to the bottom of things. I can’t live without hope, and it has been taken from me. I feel a heathen! My religious training, my church-going, does nothing for me at a time like this. I have never been brought near death before. It appals me! Why are you sure that—that mother is still living, that the soul lives on? Give me your grounds for saying so.”

“Your mother believed in Christ. These are His own words: ‘I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die!’”

Olive was silent, then she said at last:

“It sounds reassuring for her—not for myself!”

“Why not?”

“Oh! how can I express myself? But this is no time for pretence or affectation. Because Christ is nothing to me—no reality, I mean. Of course, I believe that He lived on earth, and died—at least, I think I do; for now I am shaken in everything! But His life and death are of no vital importance to me. I never think about Him!”

“And yet,” said Osmond slowly, “Christ is the pivot

on which the earth and heaven itself turns. He is the way from death unto life, the link between God and us. The only One by whom we can escape the penalty of our sins. The One who loved us and gave Himself for us."

Osmond's words stirred Olive's heart. He went on :  
"The Chief Corner Stone; the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. The dearly beloved Son of God, and yet—He is of no importance to us. We never give Him a thought."

Olive bowed her head in her hands. After another long silence she looked up.

"How can I make these things real to my soul? How can I make Christ Himself real?"

"By giving Him your heart to dwell in. He will make Himself real to you. Christ is a living reality, Olly. I have proved it. I know what I am talking about. He is the foundation for us to build upon. If we rest our hopes on Him we shall never be shaken, and death, which seems so terrible to us, is only a messenger to take us to Him."

"I haven't the faith," murmured Olive.

"Do what He tells you, and in doing it your faith will come."

"What does He tell me? Religion is so vague and indefinite."

"Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The sweetness of the words, uttered softly and reverently by the crippled lad, fell upon Olive's perturbed and anxious soul like veritable balm of Gilead. She said nothing, but rose from her seat; then with a murmured

"Good-night," she left Osmond and went to her own room.

The soul cannot wrestle with its agony in the presence of its fellow-creatures. Alone on her knees, Olive lifted up her despairing, faithless eyes to God Himself. Tossed to and fro with doubts and fears, her whole life rose up before her as a gigantic failure. "What have I lived for?" was her cry. "I have been living like an animal, with no thought of the future in my mind. I never reckoned with death. If it is all true, if there is a heaven and a hell, if I had been taken as suddenly as mother has, where should I be to-night?" And then she prayed as she had never prayed before.

"Lord save me or I perish!"

There must come such times to every thinking man or woman. Some may gloss it over, and stifle their starving soul's cry of distress by plunging afresh into a life of excitement and pleasure. Some may feverishly set to work, and try by a rigid life of self-denial and good deeds to make their own atonement for a misspent life. Few, perhaps, have the courage to sift deeply the cause of their unrest and uneasiness, and finding all efforts of their own insufficient and useless at such a crisis, cast themselves humbly and unreservedly upon the "Rock of Ages," the Rock which is old enough, and strong enough, and sure enough to bear them up through the world's tempests and storms, and carry them safe into eternity, beyond the grave.

Far into the night did Olive struggle with her new-born convictions and longings. She had taken life easily and lightly, and had laughed at her sister's grievances and discontent. She had been secure in her self-con-

fidence and complacency, and though she had had hours of anxious thought when alone, it was always for others and never for herself. Now she was experiencing some depths in her inner life which she had never fathomed before, and again Duke's words sounded in her ears :

“ A happy life is when the inner life is adjusted so satisfactorily that it gives one no trouble.”

She felt frightened, bewildered, and helpless through it all. She fell asleep at last, worn out by her emotions, with the words sounding like sweet music in her ear :

“ Come unto Me . . . and I will give you rest.”

## CHAPTER VII

### "A CHANGE"

And out of darkness came the hands  
That reach thro' nature, moulding men.

—*In Memoriam.*

"OLIVE, where are you? Vinny has received a letter from Randolph, and she wants to talk to you about it."

Elsie came out upon the lawn where Olive was talking to their old gardener, and her eyes were bright with excitement.

It was a fortnight since the funeral, and in that time a great deal had been planned and carried out. The servants had all received notice to leave; the house and furniture were going to be put up for sale; and it was the question of where a new home was to be started that was now troubling every one's mind. Olive looked round at the sound of her sister's voice with a smile. It was only her lips that smiled now, never her eyes; the laughter had died out of them, and a shadow seemed to rest upon her brow.

"I am coming," she said; "I am only telling Davey to save some cuttings that he has taken, and thought would have been no use to us. Now tell me the news."

"No," said Elsie, "I shall let Vinny be the one to do that; but come in, as it will entail a consultation."

They found Vinny up in the schoolroom. She looked as bright as Elsie, and yet a little anxious. "Olive,



Randolph has actually suggested of his own accord that Elsie should come with us abroad. He asked me what your plans were, and I told him nothing was settled yet. I never dreamt that after all these years he should suggest what I have so often longed for."

"And what about the expenses?"

"He says that will be his affair. I cannot understand it."

"My chance has come at last," murmured Elsie to herself, looking rapturously out into the sunny garden. Olive felt a sinking at heart. One by one seemed to be going from her, but she spoke cheerfully.

"So Diogenes and I will be left together. Now, what shall we do, and where shall we settle, and what shall I do for a livelihood?"

"I have been thinking about it," said Vinny; "you are fond of the country, are you not, Olive?"

"Yes, I love it. But there is no chance of employment in the country."

"I don't think you need be in a hurry about that. You can live much cheaper in the country than in town. Last year, if you remember, I went to a farm to recruit after influenza."

"Yes," Olive said, "not so far from here. I was away at the time, but I think—mother"—(she choked a little over the word) "went over to see you by train one day."

"Yes, she did. It is only two stations lower down the line; you have to drive five miles. It is an ideal place in the summer; and a delightful old couple keep it, and they will board you, and board you comfortably too, for fifteen shillings a week."

"Does that mean that you had your meals with them?"

"Oh, no; I had a nice large sitting-room. I have been thinking it would be just the place for you and Osmond to go to till we come back from our travels. You would be within reach of your friends, and yet would be economising as you could never do were you to take rooms in this town. You could keep in touch with Eddie; and then later on, before next winter sets in, we could arrange together what had best be done. What do you think?"

"It sounds nice; how do you like the idea of it, Diogenes?"

"First rate, if you won't find it dull."

"I have never felt dull in my life!" asserted Olive spiritedly. "Then we shall want no maid with us, Vinny. Can they give us attendance into the bargain?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, you must not be too particular; but as I tell you, I was very comfortable there, and I loved it. I should take any small bits of furniture that might be useful to you; for there is plenty of room, and I should sell all the rest; for furniture can be bought so cheaply now-a-days, and I think storing it is a great mistake."

"I will go and see the place to-morrow, and make arrangements with them," said Olive with alacrity.

She did so, and came back with glowing accounts of the old farm. In the busy time that followed, all had so much to do and think of, that quiet talk seemed out of the question, and perhaps it was as well. Elsie was the first one to leave the old home. She was very silent about her feelings, and Olive could never get below the

surface with her; but Osmond got a word in, when she came to wish him good-bye.

"It seems unfeeling of me," said Elsie to him, as she looked round the old schoolroom, and began to realise for the first time, that she would never see it again; "but I am so full of the future, that I cannot regret leaving this. I little thought I should ever get my desire fulfilled. Imagine *me*, Diogenes! one who has never been much outside the radius of Blackenbury, seeing London, Paris, Brussels, travelling up the Rhine to Cologne, and visiting all the foreign cathedrals and picture-galleries."

"Will you promise me something?" asked Osmond, smiling at her eager words.

"What is it?"

"Let me know when your life fails to satisfy you."

"Oh, yes, I can promise that; but you will have to wait a long while, I can tell you!"

Then after a minute, she added with a smile, "I have my bricks at last, Diogenes, so I shall begin to build."

"Without the foundation stone?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think I shall have a good deal to build upon. Don't preach, there's a good boy, and take care of Olive—poor Olive! How her life and mine is dividing. But to tell you the plain truth, I could not live in this neighbourhood without mother."

Her voice broke a little. She added hurriedly, "I have never made friends here as Olive has. I like the Croftons, and Dot, but Olive is the favourite with them, and I shall not be missed. Good-bye, and if I find that my fuller life is a snare, and a delusion, I will write and tell you."

She was gone, and Osmond lay back on his couch, and prayed for her.

The last night in the home came to Olive. She had been packing all day, and saying good-bye to her most intimate friends; and now she stood weary and forlorn in the empty morning-room. Men were ticketing lots for the sale in two days' time; packing cases and litter of all sorts were scattered in every direction; but just for a few minutes she had the room to herself, and it was then that a letter was handed to her by the maid—a letter that sent the blood rushing through her veins, and made her hands tremble as she touched it.

It was from Duke.

She sat down on a packing case by the window, straining her eyes to see by the dusky twilight; and read it through with beating heart.

MY DEAR OLIVE,

I may still address you by the old name, may I not? I feel I must send you a line of sympathy and pity, since I have heard the sad tidings of your loss. My heart is with you. To me she was a second mother, and I cannot bear to think of your home without her gentle presence. May God help and comfort you in this sore trouble. Her gain, but our loss, and it will take long to reconcile us to it. With my sincerest sympathy,

Believe me,

Yours,

DUKE.

Olive read it and re-read it with hot tears falling. It was a short, bald epistle, and might have been addressed to a comparative stranger, but none the less did she prize it. It was *his* writing, *his* sympathy offered.

"My heart is with you." She read between the lines,

and could picture him putting restraint upon his feelings as he wrote. Not for a moment did she doubt his love for her. Marmaduke was not a man that altered. He was no mere boy that change of scene and society might affect. Absence would only make him more steadfast and true to his one love. She had told him to try to forget her, and she could never forget the look in his eyes as he took her hand in his and kissed it. Forget her! She laughed to scorn the insinuations of his mother, that he was attracted by the English girls out at the Cape! She dwelt on the last words of this short letter. "Yours—Duke."

Hers! Of course he was hers for time and for eternity! How could she let him know that she was his in return? Olive laid the letter gainst her soft cheeks caressingly, and sitting on that dusty packing case in the empty, desolate room, she was wafted into dreamland, into a region where nothing was distinct but just herself and one other. The twilight faded away, and darkness still found her there with the light of love and hope shining out of her blue eyes.

She was roused at last by Margot, faithful Margot, who, since her mistress' death, had transferred her care and affection to the two who needed it most.

"Miss Olive, come away. I have just taken a cup of hot soup into the schoolroom for you. You will want to keep up your strength for your move to-morrow."

"How do you think Mr. Osmond will stand it, Margot?"

"He has gone to bed as calm and composed as an infant," was the reply. "It is but a short journey, and I

would plead again to come with you, and settle you in, Miss Olive."

Olive shook her head, but she laid her hand affectionately on the old servant's arm.

"I am equal to everything. I know where you are going, so I promise if either of us are ill to send for you, and when I get rich I shall ask you to come and be my housekeeper."

Then with a little, quick sigh she ran lightly from the room; but she slept that night with Duke's letter under her pillow, and its advent helped her through the bitterness of the parting hours in her old home.

Olive never forgot that first arrival at Orchard Farm. The journey was an anxious one, for brave and patient as Osmond was, it was a terrible undertaking for him. Yet his pain was lessened by the kind thought of Lord Bannister, who sent over his brougham to take him the whole distance by the road, and with soft cushions and every care he was not nearly so exhausted by it as Olive feared. It was a drive of sixteen miles; the afternoon was a lovely one, and the country picturesque in the extreme. Muriel came over to see them started. She had been in and out a good deal since Vinny had carried off Elsie, and was delighted to think that her friends were not going out of her reach. Her parting words were:

"I shall ride over and see you, Olive, very often. I always wished for a farm life, and I quite envy you your summer."

Olive seemed her bright, cheery self, and she chatted on unceasingly to Osmond for the first few miles, then gradually they dropped conversation and subsided into

silence, both looking out with interest at the objects they passed by. It was five o'clock when they drove through the little village of Egerton Cross. The thatched cottages standing back from the road, and the old church and rectory on a rising green knoll surrounded by clusters of elms and oaks, delighted Osmond, who had a keen eye for the picturesque. They passed the village, and then turned up a green lane, at the top of which was a white, wooden gate which led direct to the farm. When they came out in front of it he uttered an exclamation of pleasure. It was an old, red brick building, long and low in shape, with gable attics and a thatched roof. A wooden porch was covered with June roses, and creepers clustered thickly round the casement windows. The front faced the flower garden, and beyond, the orchard, from which the farm took its name. The farmyard and buildings were at the back. The garden was gay with old-fashioned flowers, and the small lawn contained one or two hen-coops with broods of downy yellow chickens following their respective mothers with a great deal of fuss and clatter. A small gate led into the orchard, and beyond that again was a lovely view of the valley and the hills on the farther side. Another gate led into the kitchen garden, and this was surrounded by a red brick wall, as old as the house itself.

When the carriage stopped two women and a large, brown mastiff came to the door.

Mrs. March, the mistress, was a pleasant, cheery looking woman, the picture of health and strength. Her companion was a tall, wiry spinster, as angular in figure as Mrs. March was round, and a face shining with soap and water. Mrs. March introduced her as "my sister-

in-law, who lives with us," and then both women bent their energies to making their lodgers comfortable.

They were shown into a comfortable parlour overlooking the garden. A fresh white cloth was spread on the round table, and a vase of roses was in the centre. Home-made bread and butter, golden honey, and a large currant cake adorned the table. There was a roomy couch for Osmond, two quaint oak cupboards and a couple of easy chairs. Nothing pretentious, but as Olive looked round she felt she could make a charming sitting-room out of it. A room adjoining this had been fitted up as a bedroom for Osmond, and Olive occupied one over the parlour.

She stood at her window an hour later enjoying the quiet homeliness of everything around her. Osmond had retired to rest, and she was so weary that she felt inclined to follow his example; yet the sweet summer evening kept her enchained to her window.

"It will be a time of peace here," she thought; "but it will give me a lot of time for thinking. How I wish my heart was at rest! I do not see yet the way out of my difficulties. Diogenes has such strong, such simple faith: I envy him! I want to get on the right foundation, but I cannot realise it. I think I begin to understand now what Duke meant by the inner life. I am finding out that I have got fears, and troubles, and needs that the outside life cannot help, which I alone must grapple with. I suppose I never felt the realities of life and death before, and oh, how I should like to feel on a firm footing with regard to them! Adjusted rightly! I can't adjust it rightly. I pray, but I seem to get no answer. Diogenes tells me to read my Bible, but I don't



understand it. I will have another try, but I don't quite know where to read."

She took up her little Bible, and leaning on the window ledge, turned over the leaves rather listlessly. Then she settled down to read Revelation. The fifth verse of the first chapter stopped her:

"Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood."

"I wish I could say that. I do see what a failure my life must seem in God's sight, how full of sin. But how can I know that Christ loved *me* and will wash *me* from sin?"

She sighed, then read on till she came to the seventeenth verse of the third chapter.

Then a light seemed to break in.

"I do know my need, this is typical of me. I am wretched, miserable, blind, for I can't see what others see, and yet how I long to! Here is my need described, and I suppose the next verse is the remedy. It brings me back to Christ, just as Diogenes told me."

She read on.

"Yes, if I let Christ into my heart, He will do it all; He will adjust my life rightly, and calm my doubts, and give me faith. I am beginning to see it at last. It is just handling myself over to Him to be put right from head to foot."

She closed her Bible, and knelt by the open window. The soft June air played with her ruffled hair as she bowed it in her hands. The stars above and silver moon were the only witnesses that a great transaction was taking place at that small chamber window. Like the fishermen on the storm-tossed boat, when hope was dy-

ing fast, Olive found that the presence of the Master brought instant peace and rest.

And when she at last rose from her knees, her face, though wet with tears, was shining with a wonderful glad experience.

She had found the sure foundation for her feet, and the trouble in life, the terrors in death, would no longer move her.

## CHAPTER VIII

### STILL LIFE

In green old gardens hidden away  
From sight of revel, and sound of strife,  
Where the bird may sing out his soul ere he dies,  
Nor fears for the night, so he lives his day,  
Where the high, red walls, which are growing grey,  
With their lichen and moss embroideries,  
Seem sadly and sternly to shut out Life,  
Because it is often as sad as they.

. . . . .  
In green old gardens, hidden away  
From sight of revel, and sound of strife,  
Here have I leisure to breathe and move,  
And to do my work in a nobler way ;  
To sing my songs, and to say my say ;  
To dream my dreams, and to love my love ;  
To hold my faith, and to live my life,  
Making the most of its shadowy day.

— *Violet Fane.*

THOSE were very happy days at Orchard Farm ; happy in spite of all the trouble through which Olive and Osmond had just passed. They loved the quaintness and old-fashioned simplicity of their surroundings, and were soon the greatest friends with the farmer and his wife. The farmer, Andrew March by name, was a character in his way. He was very fond of going into the parlour and having a chat with Osmond when Olive was out, but nothing would induce him to venture in when she was there.

"A knows what respec' is due to a lady, and if she has a likin' for a chat with my humble self, well then a shall be proud and pleased to see her in my kitchen, when wife and a be settled down of an evenin'."

Osmond found the comfort of being on the ground floor. He was now able to be wheeled out into the garden and orchard in his chair with little difficulty, and the sweet air of early summer seemed to give him fresh life and strength. He enjoyed his talks with the farmer, who, though an illiterate man, had much sound sense in his composition, mingled with a very narrow outlook on the world beyond his ken.

"Noa, master," he would say to Osmond, bringing down his broad, horny hand with a resounding smack on his knee, "a dussn't lose by not readin' and writin', an' such likes! What good do it do for a man? He takes in a lot o' new-fangled notions o' young chaps half his age, instead o' usin' the brains that Almighty has given him. A keeps my experience an' the knowledge my father handed down to me in my head. My father began with a shillin' in his pocket; he left this farm with not a penny owin', an' a can't do better than him. News? A hears the news when a goes to market, an' 'tis the price o' wheat, an' eggs, an' such like is enough for me. A doant care what the forriners be aboot, nor the queen (God bless her), nor parlyment! They doant interfere with me, an' why need a interfere with 'em? A'm the master o' my farm, an' doant want to be master o' anythink else! A'm a peaceable man, an' so is wife. If ye wants a body up to the times, wi' knowledge of every livin' craytur' under the sun a-droppin' out o' her finger ends, then talk to my sister Bess! She

wur in Lunnon when a maid, an' it's clung to her natur' ever since. She tried the dressmakin' for a time, an' dressmakin' an' tailorin' turn out a brave lot o' talkers! But 'tis talk from books an' papers—she has no mind o' her own, poor craytur'! 'tis alway 'a read it, a tell 'ee, so it must be true!' Ha! ha! she be the scholar, an' wife an' me be the dunces, but a'm jiggered if us bain't the happiest o' the party!"

And certainly Andrew March and his wife were one of the cheeriest couples that either Olive or Osmond had ever come across.

Miss March was indefatigable in her work. It was she who waited on them and attended to all their wants. She, only aided by a stout maid of all work, kept the whole house clean and tidy, and the dairy was her special charge and pride. Olive liked to go in there in the early morning and watch her quick, deft hands turn out pound after pound of beautiful, yellow butter. She was a quick worker, and a quick talker, and looked upon her brother's ignorance about the outside world with humorous pity.

"None of us were brought up with education, Miss Tracy, and Andrew always played truant when he could get a chance. The young scamp never touched a book after he left school, and soon forgot all he learnt. I always had a pinin' for learnin' and for books, and when my aunt in London took a likin' to me and carried me off with her I was wild like with delight. Poor Andrew has never been more than fifteen mile away from here, and his world just stops there! I don't think he'd care if Europe, Asia, Africa and America were all burst up with volcanoes. And if an earthquake would shake Scotland, Ireland and Wales into the sea, and floods

would drown every bit of England except just round here, he would smoke his pipe and not turn a hair, and say 'twouldn't hurt him! While as to religion, Miss Tracy, he's like a haythen. He do b'lieve the Bible because his mother did, but he says the vicar reads it to him once a week on Sunday and he digests it all the week till the next time come; and that's enough for any man, he says. And Miss Tracy, if you b'lieve me, he will have it that not another book in the whole wide world is true. If you speaks on history to him, he says, 'How d'ye know it's true? You weren't there an' I weren't there, and the chaps can put what lies they like: there be no one to contradict 'em.' Which is a foolish, ignorant way to talk, but he knows no better."

Miss March took a weekly London paper, which came to her by the post every Saturday and was the signal for much mirth at her expense by her brother.

"Here comes Bess's gossip, wife! Now for the news of the quality! Ringlets is comin' in fashion, Bess, an' Dick has run away wi' Tom's maid, and lords and dooks is a-sittin' down to dinner, an' the cannibals in 'Mericky is cuttin' and eatin' up the soldiers and sailors! An' the world is turnin' round, and London folks is askin' where Miss Bess March has gotten!"

All of which witticisms Bess would receive in scornful silence; but she would read bits of news out to her sister-in-law when the farmer was not in the room, and Mrs. March would listen and enjoy it, and repeat as much as she could remember to her husband when she got the chance.

Olive and Osmond were respectively dubbed the "Miss" and the "Master" by Andrew and his wife,

but Miss March always gave them the full benefit of their surname, dragging it in on every occasion.

It was a lovely morning.

New-mown hay was scenting the air, and Olive and Osmond were sitting in a favourite nook of theirs under an old apple tree in the orchard. Osmond was gazing at the distant valley which lay bathed in golden sunshine at their feet. He was making a pretty sketch of it in water colour, for he was skilful both with pen and pencil. Olive lay back in a hammock chair. A book was in her hand, but she was not reading. Her thoughts were fluttering between her old home and South Africa. Peaceful though this life was, she was too active a spirit to be happy in it for long, and she missed intensely the housekeeping cares and management of a household to which she had always been accustomed. Suddenly a childish voice broke on her reverie :

"I'm sure they would like to see Beautiful."

Olive turned round. Standing at the gate leading from the garden to the orchard was a fair-haired child in a white sun-bonnet, and large brown holland overall. In her arms she was hugging a doll, and Mrs. March was behind her.

"Come in and speak to us, little girl," said Olive brightly, being thankful for a respite from her thoughts. "Who is it, Mrs. March? A little friend of yours?"

"I'm Miss Ida Hunt from the Rectory," said the small maiden, advancing with leisure and dignity. "I play in this orchard *quite* by myself when Mrs. March lets me."

Olive felt that she and Osmond were distinctly in the way.

"Show me your doll," she said; "do you call her 'Beautiful' ? That is a pretty name."

"She's not a doll at all, she's my child. She's more than three years old, and she understands *everything* I say to her."

Ida stood in front of Olive and spoke severely, lifting a lovely pair of grey eyes to her face. Then she held out "Beautiful" for inspection.

"She kicked off her shoes and stockings this morning, she was too hot," announced the little mother.

"Beautiful" was a long, lanky personage with kid arms and fingers, and white cotton feet that dangled indifferently from below a rather dirty print frock. Her face had once been a comely one, but the heat of winter fires and summer sunshine had reduced her waxen features considerably, especially her nose, which was the very tiniest bump, and rather a dirty one. Her countenance was pale and sticky, and a pair of black eyes were the only distinguishable mark about her. These stared impartially and tranquilly at every one. A wisp of yellow hair stood upright in the middle of a very bald crown, whilst round her neck were some glass beads. Her whole appearance was that of ill-use and decay, but she occupied the biggest half of a child's heart and was therefore not to be despised.

"You are new peoples," observed Ida, never flinching in her upward gaze. "Beautiful and me hasn't seen new peoples for years. Not since last Christmas when mother had a lady to stay."

"Do we look nice?" inquired Osmond, trying to throw anxiety in his tone.

"Are you lazy?" demanded Ida, turning her gaze upon the speaker.



"No, only ill."

"Do you take medicine? Beautiful does. We make it of the milk that comes out of dandelion stalks, with some water."

"Sit down and tell us more about Beautiful and yourself," said Olive smiling.

Ida obeyed instantly, and sat on the grass with her legs well tucked under her. Beautiful was propped against an old tree stump.

"She's getting too big to be always in my lap," was the explanation offered; "and I like to look at her to see she behaves."

Then the small damsel crossed her plump hands and waited for her elders to speak again.

"And do you roam all over the country by yourself?" asked Olive with interest. "Have you no nurse? No brothers and sisters?"

Ida shook her head.

"I'm too big for a nurse. Delia dresses me and mends my clothes. I'll tell you who lives in our house, shall I? There's Delia. She says she's going to marry Mr. Stephens who keeps the blacksmith's shop, and then she won't live with us any more. And she's going to have a wedding, and I shall hold her gloves and nosegay for her when she's in church. Delia will make a cake when I go to her house to tea."

A pause, in which Ida gazes vacantly in front of her in rapt contemplation of this anticipated bliss. Then hurriedly she continues, "and there's Dan, and he is a dirty boy, for he eats his lunch with his blacking fingers, and never washes them, and then there's cook, and she won't let me in the kitchen, *never*, and I wish she'd get

married like Delia! And there's Kate, and Kate made Beautiful this nice frock, and she lets me wash up in her pantry when I'm very good. I think that's all in our house."

"No father and mother?"

"Why, yes, of course, our house belongs to them, and to me and Beautiful."

She seizes hold of the staring doll, and bestows a wet kiss on her sticky cheeks.

"Isn't she a darling? I love her better than the whole world!"

"Not better than father and mother?"

"Oh, quite different; Beautiful is always with me. I have her all day and all night, and she knows—oh, such a lot!"

The fair head bobbed up and down mysteriously, then she added, "Mother has the parish, and I have Beautiful!"

"And what about father?"

Ida considered, then —

"Father has God."

This sublime utterance coming out triumphantly from the rosy lips was followed by silence. Osmond looked away to the distant hills, whilst a smile played about his lips. Olive looked at the child with tender awe.

But Ida was looking round for something to play with. Then with a quick spring she seized hold of Osmond's sketch book.

"Did you make these pictures? Beautiful likes pictures, may I show them to her?"

But Osmond put out his hand and quietly took his sketch book back.

"If you bring Beautiful here I will show you them."

So the little girl crushing her doll in her arms edged close to Osmond, and was soon absorbed in the sketches. Her delight when she recognised the farm, and a rough sketch of Andrew, was great. "Now," she said imperatively; "put me and Beautiful in a picture. I'll stand ever so still, and if Beautiful moves I'll shake her!"

So the strange little couple were arranged under the apple tree, and Olive seeing Mrs. March go into the kitchen garden to pick gooseberries, followed her. Her last sight of Ida was a pretty one. She had taken off her sun-bonnet, and her fluffy fair hair stood round her tiny face like a halo. Her eyes were big with excitement, and she was saying in a shrill whisper: "If I don't talk very loud I shan't move much, and if a fly comes on my nose you must put him in, for I mustn't shake him off!"

"What a little character she is," said Olive to Mrs. March. "Does she often come and pay you visits?"

Mrs. March shook her head.

"She's running wild, Miss; and though she's our rector's daughter, I must say it. He is a good man is our rector, a little too clever for us. I hear tell he spends all his days in his study, writin' and readin'. He never comes a visitin', but Mrs. Hunt is always at it. She haves a mothers' meetin', and a club, and a missionary work party, and a friendly girls' evenin', and a lads' night school, and she be on all the committees for everythin' agoin', and Miss Ida, she be supposed to be looked after by Delia French, but, bless your heart! the giddy girl is always a-gaddin' round on her own business, and Miss Ida, she be always a-runnin' away on hers! Did

ye ever see such an old fright of a doll, Miss? Well, there has been terrible ructions at the rectory on a Sunday over it. Mrs. Hunt said it must be put away on the Sabbath, and Miss Ida, who be terrible wilful, won't give in to it. She cried herself ill one Sunday, for 'tis like a livin' thing to her, not a plaything at all, then she was whipped; but by hook or crook, that child would have her doll, and at last the rector spoke out, and said she was a baby so she might be allowed it a bit longer. Then she marches into church with it, and sits it up in the pew, and insists on providin' it with hymn book and prayer book, and the school children titter, and Mrs. Hunt takes it up and marches out of church with it, and Miss Ida bursts into a fit of weeping over it. She don't bring it to church now, but 'tis the only time she has it out o' her arms. Yet she's a sweet little maid, and has such pretty wheedlin' ways with her that she's the pet of the village."

When Olive returned to the orchard, she found the sketch just finished, and Ida expressing her opinion as to its merits.

"You've made Beautiful a fright," she was saying, "you've made her two eyes, and no mouth."

"I don't see any mouth," said Osmond. Ida turned from him petulantly. "That's what father says, as if I can't see her darling mouth; why, I kiss it all day long! I don't like that picture. You can have it. I don't want it."

Olive caught her up in her arms, and then ensued a regular romp in the old orchard, Olive enjoying it quite as much as her small friend. Then Ida suddenly announced her intention of going home.

She shook hands gravely.

"I like you," she said; "and I'll come again and play games with you; and I like the ill man too, but Beautiful doesn't, because he has made her a fright!" Then she trotted off, and Olive looked at Osmond with dancing eyes.

"She has made me feel young again, Diogenes. I don't think the spirit has entirely gone out of me!"

"I am feeling younger every day," said Osmond, with a happy sigh. "Oh! isn't the world beautiful! It sometimes almost overpowers one!"

## CHAPTER IX

### WALKS AND TALKS

He is the happy man whose life e'en now  
Shows somewhat of that happier life to come ;  
Who doom'd to an obscure but tranquil state,  
Is pleased with it.—*Cowper*.

THE rector's wife soon called, with apologies for her husband, who seldom was seen by any of his parishioners except in church.

"And perhaps it is quite as well so," said his wife ; "for, as it is, I have my own way entirely in the parish, and I work best when I am sole head. It is a small village, but there are a good many outlying farms and cottages, and it takes me all my time to get round. Are you a worker, Miss Tracy ?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Olive ; "I suppose I ought to be. I should like to be. I am secretly lamenting I have so little to do here."

Out came a well-worn pocket-book, from Mrs. Hunt's small bag, and she rapidly turned over the leaves.

"Have you a pencil and paper ? Thank you. Now, I am going to turn over Jonas Wright to you. He is blind and old, and his grand-daughter is a shiftless, untidy creature. You must go and see him at least once a week. Read to him and cheer him up. Scold his grand-daughter, and make her keep his place tidy. He lives about a mile from here across the fields. A nice walk for you. Wait a minute, I must give you some

one else. Do you think you could try your hand at reforming a drunken woman, who longs to give it up, and can't? She has a dear boy who is in our choir, and she's breaking his young heart, and saddening his life. Will you try her?"

"I suppose I must," said Olive, adding rather shyly, "I can but point her to the One who really can help her."

Mrs. Hunt's expressive face softened at once. She laid her hand on Olive's arm.

"My dear Miss Tracy, I see you know the remedy for all the misery around us. People think this an ideal village. If they knew all the people's private histories as I do, they would say sin was as rampant in the country as it is in town. It is no good telling weak human nature to right itself; it never will. We want to bring them to the Healer of all weakness and frailty; we want to graft them on to the overcoming One."

Olive's eyes glistened; she lost her heart to Mrs. Hunt there and then, and a friendship was formed that lasted through life.

When spoken to about her small daughter, Mrs. Hunt adopted another tone.

"I know the parish thinks I neglect her, but I honestly don't understand children. I am too severe with them, so I find it the best policy to leave the young monkey alone. In another year or two I shall get her a governess and then her training will begin. It won't hurt her to work off her animal spirits by running wild a little, she has too strong a will for me to combat, and I hate being worsted by a child."

Olive doubted the wisdom of this training, but she

liked Mrs. Hunt's honest frankness, and gladly promised to visit one or two other parishioners besides the ones already mentioned. She was amused at a little passage of arms Mrs. Hunt had on leaving, with the old farmer, who met her at the gate.

"Ah, Andrew, so glad to meet you. For I've forgotten to leave this month's magazine for your wife. Will you take it to her?"

Andrew took off his hat and rubbed his head doubtfully.

"A dussn't want to be onceevil, mum," he said; "but wife be far too sensible to fill up her head wi' such rubbish, an' a would as lief throw it to the pigs as stuff her wi' it!"

"Now, Andrew, what narrow-minded bigotry! You don't know how to read yourself, and you want to keep every one else in the same ignorance! For shame! Your sister must take you in hand. She always likes to hear the parish news, if you don't!"

"Ay, she do, but a can bring 'er more of that than the rector would like to put down in that there paper book! A has my eyes and ears, thank God, and a makes better use on 'em than to squint an' screw 'em on a black mass o' words, an' then get no more, an' not so much, as in the Red Lion on market days. Wife shan't have 'er eyes blinded, and her mind crooked, by such tomfoolery. A'll take the paper to Bess, poor silly craytur'; she were tellin' on us there were a love story runnin' thro' it. Do 'ee think, as our rector's wife, as it be seemly to be propagatin' such made up fancical things now?"

"Well," said Mrs. Hunt, not a bit taken aback, "I



don't expect you thought it 'fancical rubbish' when you were courting your wife, did you? Do you remember that time, Andrew?"

Andrew grinned from ear to ear.

"Ay, don't a just! A cotched 'er comin' home from church; an' a stood by the stile, an' wouldn't let 'er by till she said 'yes.'"

"Now, you go in and ask her if that love story was tomfoolery. Good-afternoon."

With brisk steps Mrs. Hunt disappeared, and Andrew, holding the parish magazine by the extremity of two fingers, went into the kitchen and flung it on the table in disgust.

Bess was ironing. She had heard the conversation, but except by a twinkle in her eyes, did not betray it.

"There's your time waster, Bess. A've been a tellin' the rector's wife a bit o' my mind consarnin' it."

"I hope she is wiser for it," said Bess good-humouredly.

Andrew looked at her; then with a shrug of his shoulders went out to find his wife, without another word.

One afternoon soon after this Lady Muriel came riding over with her groom. She was delighted with the farm, and explored every nook and corner with the curiosity of a child. When she was enjoying a cup of tea in the old-fashioned parlour, Olive said:

"Give us some news of Brackenbury, Dot. Diogenes and I feel quite out of the world here."

"Ah," said Muriel laughing; "you wouldn't call this out of the world if you had ever been through the Rocky Mountains. I thought I never could stand it at first,

but, do you know, after a time you almost lose interest in the outside world, for your own adventures and experiences are so absorbing that you never think of anything else. I'm afraid it is rather bad for one. What do you think, Diogenes ? ”

“ I think travellers can be exempt from the charge of selfishness and narrow-mindedness. I have known some people who live in the midst of everything who yet are so absorbed in their own affairs that they take no interest in any one or anything else. That is inexcusable, I think.”

“ Our dear Andrew is rather of that type,” said Olive, with a little laugh ; “ and yet how I enjoy his intolerance of anything that happens outside his radius. It is so original and uncommon.”

“ Perhaps we shall fall into the same snare.”

“ Never, as long as we have our daily paper and post.”

Olive's tone was emphatic.

“ Well,” said Muriel, “ I must try and widen your interests while I am here. I was calling on Lady Crofton yesterday, Olive. She is not very well, and she misses you very much ; she said so. She was talking to me about her sons, and has got it into her head that Duke has lost his heart to an English girl out there. I told her I thought it was much more likely to be Mark, but strangely enough father brought home some friend of his to dine last night, an African explorer, who has just come home from the Cape, and he said pretty much the same thing, that he had heard Captain Crofton was engaged. Do you believe it ? Somehow or other I never can think Duke the kind of man to fall in love

suddenly, and rush into an engagement. He seems too steadfast and reliable."

"I don't believe a word of it," Osmond said vehemently.

Olive smiled, but said nothing. After tea she and Muriel went out into the garden and paced the walks arm-in-arm. Olive chatted away in good spirits. Muriel turned upon her suddenly :

"Olive, you are different to what you used to be. What is it? Don't get sober and strait-laced. I know all you have gone through, but I hope it hasn't quenched your fun."

"Does it seem like it?" said Olive lightly.

"Yes, your laugh rings false, and your fun is put on."

"Oh, don't accuse me of such deceit."

"Well, be serious for a minute."

"But you were begging me not to be a minute ago. How can I know how to please you?"

"You know what I mean. I want you to be your own natural self with me."

Then Olive dropped her bantering tone.

"I have been through a good deal, Dot, more than I hope you will ever go through. I have been in the depths, and have stayed there till I was all but lost, and then I was rescued, and have come out into a wonderful calm. I think a few months ago I was like Undine, without a soul, and now I have found I have one."

Muriel squeezed her friend's arm and looked away into the soft blue above her. She was a girl of few words when she felt the deepest.

"But your experience must be a happy one now?" she hazarded.

"Oh, yes," and a clear light shone in Olive's blue eyes; "but, to speak frankly, I am rather worrying over my future. I don't say much to Diogenes, who takes life very placidly, and seems to think we shall be a fixture here; but when the autumn comes I must leave him and earn my livelihood in some way."

"Oh, Olive! surely that is not necessary?"

"Indeed, it is, but how to set to work is difficult. I am not clever; I cannot teach, nor type-write, nor book-keep. I lie awake at night and turn it over in my mind. For I must be arranging something soon. I have no talent for dressmaking nor millinery. I don't think I have the enterprise to start a shop. I am not suited to be a companion. I am not staid or patient enough."

Muriel looked grave.

"It seems so dreadful after your happy home life. I used to envy you so."

"Well," said Olive bravely, "we have it to look back to, and that is a comfort. If only Elsie's future were settled, I should not mind so much for myself."

"Oh, she will live with your sister Vinny; she will get so accustomed to have her that she will not let her go again."

Olive smiled, but shook her head.

"I won't be dismal," she said after a minute's silence. "I am not so really, only a little anxious. I have a great deal to make me happy. I shall wake up one morning with a brilliant idea for my future. And you will find me perhaps outraging all my friends' sense of propriety. I have a bold idea in the back of my head, but it wants capital to put into execution."

"Do tell me, I know it is something funny!"

"It is to fit up an ordinary gipsy van, and have a very good cooking stove inside. Then go round in it, on a kind of tour through country towns and villages, and cook cheap dinners for the British workman. I'm a very good cook, you know, and an economical one. Then for twopence a lesson I would teach any wife how to make a favourite dish, and I'm sure it would be a philanthropic enterprise, wouldn't it? Mrs. Hunt, our rector's wife here, informs me that nine-tenths of the men are made drunkards through bad cooking. I'm not so sure about it being a paying concern. What do you think?"

"I think it would be splendid," said Muriel enthusiastically; "and such adventures you would have! Would you go quite alone?"

"No, I should have a respectable youth with me, who would look after the horse and van; and I should invite a friend from time to time to join me."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't pay," said Muriel, with a wise little shake of her head; "but it would be a delicious thing to do. And if you were to cook dinners for the men, you should cook hot scones and tea cakes for the women's tea!"

Olive laughed merrily.

"And then make sweets for the children. I wish I could!"

"I shall think it over," said Muriel laughing, "and see if it could not be managed. Now I must go. You will come over and see me soon, won't you?"

"I have promised Lady Crofton to go over to her next week; perhaps I had better not try to see you the same day, but I will come as soon as ever I can."

When Muriel had ridden off, Olive put on her hat and went out for a walk. There were times when, much as she loved the farm and its surroundings, she felt she must get away from it. Her inactive life at present chafed her sorely. She was thankful for the little bit of parish work that Mrs. Hunt had given her, but felt it inadequate to satisfy the energy of her nature.

Now as she tramped along the country lanes her thoughts were very busy.

"I don't think I could stand it," she mused, "if I had not underneath it all such comfort and rest. I remember Diogenes' words, the night that Duke came to wish us good-bye. 'It is so grand to feel that storms may come and go, but nothing can wrench you from your anchor, no uncertainty, no upheaval, deep down, always the same sure, certain rest!' I remember I thought it so priggish, and said I wasn't in want of rest, and couldn't understand such sentiments. How little I thought within a few short months what we should have to go through; mother, home, the comforts of family life, all taken away with one swoop! And yet how much I have gained! If the whole world were swept away, I should still have a foothold; an abiding place; and a Friend who will never leave me!"

She raised her eyes to the blue heavens above, and felt a thrill run through her as she thought of the future in store for her.

"What does anything matter," she thought; "we are only here such a little bit of our life; and then there is all eternity to be happy in."

She walked on brightened by such thoughts; and then as one often does, came back with a bound to earth again.

"What a ridiculous report about Duke! How could it have got about? Of course, the two brothers have been mistaken one for the other. It must be Mark, if either is engaged." She thought of Duke's look and parting words; and her cheeks flushed as she repeated them softly to herself: "God bless and keep you darling, and bring us together one day."

Then passionately and fervently, with the dull aching of a heart separated from the one it loves, she prayed aloud, knowing no human creature was within hearing.

"Oh, God, answer his prayer. Thou hast answered part. Thou hast blessed me, even through dark trouble Thou art keeping me. Bring us together again. I will not love Thee less, I cannot, but, oh, let him know that I return his love." And having prayed she was comforted.

The summer days came and passed. Olive took great interest in her poor people, and she came home from her visiting one day in great delight at having discovered that a farmer's widow in reduced circumstances had a son in the same regiment as Eddie. Moreover, it turned out that this son was the identical "Giles" whom Eddie had taken as his servant, and who was so devoted to him.

"Isn't the world small?" she exclaimed to Osmond, coming breathlessly into the sitting-room to tell him about it. "Mrs. Giles gave me a letter to read, and that made me discover it. He is such a good, steady boy, she says, and a great comfort to her. It is strange how these country people seem to view the army. Mrs. Giles said she felt she could never lift up her head again when

he came home from market one day and told her he had enlisted. And she added, "'Tis a good thing to have no pride, I reckon! When I had to leave the farm, it was a blow, and the neighbours' pity was hard to bear, but when Frank went for a soldier their contempt was downright insultin', and I felt as if my boy and me had sunk to the lowest level.' I told her how proud I was of having my brother in the army, but nothing seemed to comfort her except his steadiness."

"It almost needs a war to show the worth of our soldiers," said Osmond thoughtfully. "And I think we are not far off one. This Transvaal affair will never be settled satisfactorily without it. And all these reinforcements that are being sent out means business. You have been too busy to look at the papers to-day, but the Transvaal Government have offered the five years' franchise for Uitlanders that Chamberlain has asked for, but they have coupled it with the abolition of the suzerainty!"

"And that we shall never grant!" said Olive. "Oh, dear, how dreadful! Lady Crofton told me that Duke's last letter home was full of it. He says the Boers are getting ready for war far quicker than we are. I wish, for his mother's sake, that he had never gone out there. Of course, it was her wish, but she is getting very uneasy now."

"A soldier's business is to fight."

"Yes, of course, and one would not keep him back. I suppose Eddie may be called to go if there is fighting out there. I remember Colonel Holmes saying last spring, that if we came to war in the Transvaal, we should want every cavalry regiment we had out there.



Well, I must not stay talking about it, as I want to go down to the village and post a letter before tea."

She left the house with a grave face, and her walk was taken with very unquiet thoughts.

When she returned to the farm about an hour after, she was met at the gate by Andrew and his wife. Bess, in the background, was apparently weeding a flower-bed of some groundsel, but her look of anxiety towards Olive showed that she too was waiting for her arrival.

"A tallygram, miss," said Andrew, waiving the yellow envelope in his hand; "the boy brought it nigh on half a hour ago; and ye couldn't be found nowhere."

"I'm all of a trimble," ejaculated Mrs. March; "I went in to Mister, and he says, 'Lay it on the table, she'll be in soon,' as cool as if it were the tea tray I were a bringing in! Us haven't had a tallygram at this house, since Andrew's father were thrown from his horse, and were not expected to last the hour."

"And if it ain't bad news, it ought to be," said the farmer emphatically; "for that there lad have walked five miles to bring it, and he said it were swelterin'!"

"There, Andrew," put in Bess, quietly edging to the group, and disclosing a large bottle of salts in one hand and a fan in the other; "do go in and leave Miss Tracy to me. And if she do faint at the news, I have the correct remedies at hand."

Through this running fire of comments, Olive had read her telegram and pocketed it. She gazed at Bess in wonder, as she approached her; and with difficulty suppressed a smile.

"Don't be alarmed," she said; "it is not good news, but it is not very bad. A friend of mine wants to see

me at once ; she is not well, but I don't think it is very serious."

She passed them quickly without another word, and ran in to Osmond.

"Diogenes, this is from Lady Crofton's maid. Do you think Lady Crofton is really ill? Read it."

Osmond looked up a little wearily. He had been having one of his bad days, and had hardly taken in that a telegram had arrived. He took it in his hand and read :

"Mistress wants to see you. She has influenza."

"You must go," he said quietly, "but you cannot start to-night."

"No, I suppose not, for there is no train. I must catch the early one in the morning. There is one at eight o'clock. I hope she is not really ill. Influenza is so serious with people of her age."

Then she told him of the perturbation of the farmer and his wife ; and they laughed together over the quaintness of her greeting by them.

## CHAPTER X

### THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS

Human companionship counts for very much in life; but I think there is no doubt that the sharpest corners must always be turned alone.—*F. F. Montresor.*

ANDREW was quite willing to drive Olive himself in his trap to the station the next morning. He gave her a lot of good advice, and amused her by his graphic and intelligent remarks on the country through which they passed. Every field was known to him; every bad point and weakness in it was seized hold of and pointed out with a history of the owner. He wound up by saying, as they neared the station: "Earth is a wonderful payin' investment, prop'ly managed; for a do allow it be a bit contrary at times, an' wants to be coaxed an' humoured a bit, but them that knows the vally of it, why, they be fools to part with it, or let chaps that get their learnin' from trashy books put their fingers to it." Here came a snort of disgust.

"Why, miss, would 'ee b'lieve it? A've knowed a fine Lunnon gent that never breathed a twenty-four hours of good country air in his life, retire from business, buy a prop'ty, an' come down an' giv' out that he be a-goin' to farm his own estate! Yes, a've a-knowned such a one! Set a new-born babby at it an' the little 'un would do as well! A doant think o' walkin' up to Lunnon one fine day an' applyin' to be Prime Minister;

or yet rig myself in a uniform an' insist on actin' for the Commander-in-Chief! Every one to what they have a-bin brought up to, says a! Pigs can't fly, and larks can't grunt!"

With such talk the drive seemed a short one. Olive reached Crofton Court about half-past nine. She was met on the door-step by Lady Crofton's maid, Baker by name. Her face showed visible signs of distress.

"Oh, Miss Tracy, I'm glad to see you. Her ladyship is very ill, and she has been wearyin' for a sight of you."

"Tell me about it," said Olive gravely, as she ascended the stairs towards Lady Crofton's bedroom.

"You must have some breakfast first, miss, before you go to her. The doctor is in there now, and we have a trained nurse, who fusses a good deal and does little."

Baker led the way to Lady Crofton's boudoir, where a dainty breakfast had been set out.

"I knew you would be here early when you didn't come last night," continued Baker, who seemed thankful to have some one to talk to. "It has been so sudden, I feel in a whirl. She complained of her head two or three days ago, and then pains over her body, and she's been in high fever on and off since yesterday morning. A letter came from Captain Crofton. She was better, and she read it all through herself, and it was a long one, and then she said, 'I must see Miss Tracy, Baker, at once; she must hear this, send for her.' I said I would write, and I did so. She kept the letter under her pillow, and got very excited and almost unconscious towards the middle of the day. We sent for

the doctor again, and he telegraphed for a nurse. . But when she kept on calling for you, I telegraphed on my own account. And she seems to have gradually got worse since."

"Was there bad news in the letter?"

"I don't rightly know, except she told me that Captain Crofton might be very soon called out to fight, but that didn't seem to distress her. And Mr. Mark is leaving where he is, but there is something more. She has kept mentioning a young lady's name that I don't know."

"Oh, well, I shall see the letter," said Olive confidently, knowing that Lady Crofton always handed them over to her.

"But, Miss Tracy, I haven't told you yet. Her lady-ship was restless last night; she had this letter in her hand, and—you know her whim of having a night light on the little table close to her—somehow or other she placed the letter too near the light. It caught fire, and the nurse just seized it and threw it into the grate, where it was burnt to pieces. And ever since her lady-ship has been asking for it and fretting for it. The nurse took a letter out of her own pocket, doubled it up, and gave it to her. I don't like such deceit, but it has quieted her, and if she gives the letter to you to read you will understand."

Olive's face looked sober. She had been counting upon seeing the handwriting again of the one always in her thoughts. Fond as she was of Lady Crofton, the pleasure of being with her was always enhanced by the chance of seeing his letters, and talking about him. She followed Baker very silently into the sick room a short

time afterwards, and was shocked at the appearance of her old friend, who hardly recognised her. Her bright eyes and feverish cheeks, and the rapid murmuring to herself, all showed that she was in high fever. It was only on the chance of quieting her, that Olive was allowed to be with her. She sat down quietly by the bed; and very soon Lady Crofton lifted her head eagerly:

"Is Olive here?"

"Yes, dear Lady Crofton, I am."

Olive's clear soft voice made itself known at once. Lady Crofton laid her hand on hers with a pleased smile, and full consciousness seemed to return to her.

"I feel so ill," she said; "and I have been wanting you such a long time. There is Duke's letter, you know—it seems so sudden—you must break the news to my husband."

She seemed to get a little agitated, then fumbled under her pillow, and presented Olive with the crushed letter that had been given her.

"Read it—he is married already—I told you so, and to one of those girls—what is her name? Some fanciful one—Coral—no Cora. He is going to send her home at once, and wants her to come here. She can't stay out there—the whole country is so unsettled—they are getting ready for war!"

"Is Duke married?" asked Olive, very slowly and deliberately.

"Yes—I told you so—Cora her name is—and Mark—Mark—I want you to tell Sir Marmaduke—oh! my head!"

The nurse came forward.

"You must go," she said to Olive in a low voice; "it is too much for her."

Olive rose immediately; but Lady Crofton raised a face of piteous entreaty.

"You will make it right, Olive? You will welcome her, and make it right with Sir Marmaduke?"

Olive bent over her, and kissed her with a bright smile.

"I will make everything right that I can, don't you worry. I will tell Sir Marmaduke. You try and get to sleep. I do hope you will be better soon."

Lady Crofton dropped her head on her pillow with a sigh of relief, and Olive went out of the room dazed and bewildered—her heart like a stone.

Osmond was not surprised when he received a letter from her to tell him not to expect her back for a few days; for when he heard how ill Lady Crofton really was, he felt sure that Olive would not leave her. The Croftons had very few relatives; no nieces to come and look after them; and for years Olive had been in and out, until they almost got to look upon her as one of the family. And combined events kept Olive at Crofton Court for a good three weeks.

Lady Crofton never rallied, but quietly sank into unconsciousness, and passed away in her sleep. Sir Marmaduke seemed quite overwhelmed by his loss; and clung to Olive, refusing to let her leave him. Some distant cousins, and a good many friends, attended the funeral, but the old man would see no one but Olive. It was pathetic to see how he watched for her, and how troubled he was when she was long away. At last she was able to leave him, after promising to return in a few

days' time. When she went in to wish him good-bye, he held her hand as if he could never let it go.

"You are certain to come back to me?"

"I quite hope to do so, and shall not leave you till your daughter-in-law arrives. Perhaps she may be here soon. I wish we knew more particulars."

"I would not have her here except for Duke's sake," murmured the old man. "I do not take to strangers, but Duke is not Mark. I would not receive *his* wife! Mark, I am thankful to say, hasn't plunged into that folly yet. I doubt if he would get any respectable girl to marry him!"

"Oh, hush!" said Olive. "He may be keeping steady now. You have not heard to the contrary."

"I cannot read their letters," he said. "My dear wife always used to read them to me, but I know she reserved bits to herself. She never let me hear the worst of Mark. I fancy things have not been as they should be with him lately."

He spoke slowly and with difficulty, and Olive came away touched to the heart by his weakness and loneliness.

Osmond had been having a very quiet time; but his solitude had been enlivened by several visits from little Ida Hunt. She gradually began to look upon him as her special charge, and when one evening her father turned to her mother, and said:

"Well, my dear, and which of your parishioners have you seen to-day?" Ida broke in eagerly:

"I've been to see a parish'ner of mine to-day; I've got him all to myself, and I'm going to keep him, too. Beautiful thinks him *lovely*!"



"Who is he?" asked the rector smiling. He dearly loved to hear his little daughter talk.

"He's the ill man at Mrs. March's. He likes me to come and see him, and he knows how to laugh and make fun!"

"I am afraid you are bothering him," said Mrs. Hunt, regarding her child with curious eyes.

"But that's proper," said Ida gravely; "that's what Mrs. Smith told Delia you did, and I asked Delia what 'bothering' meant, and she said just talking."

Mrs. Hunt discreetly changed the subject. Ida's innocent face could not give offence; but the mother did not care to hear some of the villagers' opinion of her through her child's lips.

The little girl was over at the farm early in the afternoon, when Olive was expected back. She picked a wonderful nosegay of flowers from her own little garden at the rectory, and brought them over, rather the worse for being so long in the grasp of her hot little hands.

"There!" she said, standing on tiptoe to arrange them in one of Mrs. March's best china mugs. "That's to say how do you do, Miss Tracy. And the little rosebud is peeping over the geranium, and the pansies are looking through the Sweet William, because they want to see her first."

Having arranged them to her satisfaction, she began to tidy Beautiful, and she sat down on the floor by Osmond's couch to do so, chatting away the while.

"I wish I could have a nice name for you," she said, looking up at Osmond. "I call you 'Mister' like Mr. March does. You see, I don't see many gempleums, so I don't know what to call them."

"It is rather awkward," said Osmond gravely.

"The only gempiums I know," pursued Ida turning Beautiful over on her back and tying her blue sash with great care, "are uncles. What are ill people called?"

"Sometimes invalids, convalescents, patients, sometimes humbugs!"

"I think I'll call you Uncle Humbug!"

"First rate. I'm delighted to have such a name."

"Uncle Humbug, why can't God mend your legs?"

Ida was remarkable for her sudden turns of thought.

"He is going to one day," said Osmond cheerfully.

"Why isn't He quicker?"

"Because He wants me to lie here a little longer."

"When I'm a grown-up lady," said Ida with big grave eyes, "I think I'll marry you, and take care of you, only you'll have to be *very* kind to Beautiful."

The sound of wheels made her start to the door, and a minute after Olive came in. She greeted Osmond warmly, almost brightly; and took Ida up in her lap, listening to her chatter. When the child left them a little later, Olive sat down at the tea tray, and told Osmond in quiet even tones about the bereaved household which she had just left. But she kept back her biggest bit of news, which she had never had the courage to write.

She waited till dusk had fallen, and she was sitting by the open window watching the crescent of a new moon rise on the other side of the valley. Somehow or other, Olive always had grappled with her difficulties at an open window.

She spoke suddenly, breaking a silence that had fallen upon both of them.

"When did you last hear from Duke?" she asked.

"Not very lately," replied Osmond with interest. "I wrote, if you remember, in answer to his letter of sympathy directly we came here. I gave him a message of thanks from you at the same time. I have had two short notes since, that is all. I should think I ought to be hearing soon; but he is not great at corresponding, and now affairs are so unsettled I understand his not having much time for letters."

"He is married," said Olive very quietly.

"Good heavens! Who to? Then Dot's report was a true one."

"Yes. Her name is Cora Corderoy; he wrote and told Lady Crofton about it, and asked her to give her a home till he comes back from the war."

"I can't believe it. And yet he always had a way of doing things differently to most people. I suppose, if I may say it, Olly, you managed to convince him at last that you meant what you said, and he turned his attention elsewhere. She must be a wonderfully taking young person, or else there are circumstances peculiar to the case. How quick he has been about it! Didn't he let his parents know of the engagement?"

"I fancy he must have hinted at it for some time previously," said Olive in the same quiet tone, "for they did not seem surprised."

"I must write and congratulate him, I suppose," said Osmond; "but I feel stunned by the suddenness of it. I only hope she is worthy of him. He deserves a good wife."

Olive gave an imperceptible shiver, then rose resolutely from her seat.

"I am very tired," she said; "I think I will say good-night."

"You have had a most trying time, and look worn out."

She left the room, but did not go upstairs. It was only half-past nine; the household did not retire to bed till ten. Slipping on a shawl, Olive crept out of the house. It was a lovely still evening, and as she passed through the flower garden into the old walled kitchen garden, closing the gate behind her, she raised her head with a sense of freedom and relief.

"At last alone," she murmured.

To her the last few weeks had been like one long nightmare. It was well for her that her time was so occupied that she had little time to think; she had resolutely determined to live in the present and concentrate her thoughts on all the sad duties which came to her throughout Lady Crofton's last illness and the days that followed. But she knew the time would come when she would have to face her trouble, and she had come out into the dusky, silent garden to do it now. There was no fear of interruption. At Crofton Court the servants were continually coming to her for advice, and every minute that she could spare was devoted to Sir Marmaduke. Here there was no one needing her. Osmond had retired to his room blissfully unconscious of the trouble that had come to her. And she was content that it should be so. This grief of hers was too sacred, too fresh, to confide to her dearest friend. It was a trouble that she must go through alone, with no human comforter by her side.

A slim, young figure in a black dress and light shawl

pace the old garden paths and fighting desperately with her fate. Was there a chance that through the crushing agony of it all—hope and gladness turned to bitterness and disappointment—faith and trust disillusioned—life emptied of what had made it most full—and the painful realisation that it was absolutely irrevocable—she might yet come through it with a pure and chastened spirit, resigned and submissive—not to fate—but to God’s eternal will?

“I have only myself to thank for it,” she murmured; “I told him to forget me, but I never thought he would. I did not give him a ray of hope; I returned him scorn for his devotion; and he went away and found another, who did not treat him so. I have been believing in him, hoping to right myself in his eyes, blindly content to wait; secure in my trust in his fidelity; and now my eyes have been opened. I have been happy thinking, planning, dreaming; and now such very thoughts will be sin! He has a wife. I must banish him from my life completely.”

She bowed her head, and tears long restrained now found their outlet.

“My future is all dark, there is nothing to look forward to, only the difficulty of knowing and seeing and being friendly with his wife. Oh, I cannot go through it; flesh and blood cannot stand it! I long to die, and end it all!”

Then words she had come across that morning, in her reading, fell upon her ear. The same old words that Osmond had given her some time ago: “Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

But how differently they touched her now. Then, the music of it had been sweet ; but it was as a far-off song ; now it was the voice of One she knew, and One whom she had learnt to love. She raised her tearful eyes to the starry sky and a hush seemed to fall upon her spirit. It was not a God millions of miles away from the universe that spoke to her, it was the voice of God "walking in the garden in the cool of the day," and He was near, and He comforted her.

"As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you."

## CHAPTER XI

CORA

Once to every man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of Faith with Falsehood,  
For the good or evil side.—*Lowell.*

“A LETTER at last from his Grace. Now for his news!”

It was Osmond who spoke, as Miss March came in one morning at breakfast, and handed the letter. Olive took hers, and was soon so absorbed in it, that she did not hear Osmond speak.

Baker wrote for Sir Marmaduke. She had been so long in the family that she was quite accustomed to act as scribe, and there was much to discuss with Olive. It was not her letter however that absorbed Olive, but one that Sir Marmaduke had requested her to enclose. It was addressed to Lady Crofton and ran as follows :

DEAR MOTHER,

I hope you will not think me forward in addressing you so. Marmaduke has talked so much about you that I feel I know you already. You will have received his letter telling you of all our circumstances. I feel shy of coming to you as such a stranger, but Marmaduke assures me of a welcome. You will have heard of his battery being ordered to the front. I cannot express my sorrow at coming to you under such circumstances, but I am assured you will understand and receive me for *his* sake. I am writing this on board ship, and I expect you will not receive it many days before I hope to arrive.

Believe me,

Your affectionate daughter-in-law,

CORA.

Olive read and re-read this. She scrutinised every letter, every line, then folded it up leisurely, and said :

"Mrs. Duke has written a nice little letter to dear Lady Crofton. What a shock it will be to her when she arrives to find her gone !"

"Yes," assented Osmond ; "and his Grace of course is in the same ignorance. It is only a hurried line just before he was starting up country. Would you like to see it ?"

Poor Olive took the thin sheet of paper from him with marvellous self-control. That dear handwriting that she had so longed to see was in her hand at last, but no longer did it belong to her ; it was to corroborate the truth of what she had already heard.

She read it through, and quietly handed it back. It did not take long to read.

DEAR DIOGENES,

I must send you a hasty scrawl. We are off to join some other reinforcements just arrived, and are wondering who will fire the first shot. It will be a terrible long business, I am afraid. I don't know when I shall get a chance of sending a line to you again. You and Olive will think of me, I know. I wrote to mother, and Olive will have heard all our news from her. Ask Olive for my sake to receive Cora as a sister. It will be a sad time for her, and she will want a friend. Mark has gone off to Australia. I hope you will like your new diggings. I often picture you together.

Yours,

M. CROFTON.

"Not much of a scribe, is he ?" said Osmond.

"No."

"He seems to take it for granted we know all about his marriage. I wonder if a letter of his has gone astray ?"

"Perhaps. I am afraid you will be very dull,



Diogenes, when I leave you again. I am so sorry, but it seems to be my duty to go to poor old Sir Marmaduke. I shall not stay, when once Mrs. Duke has settled in. Don't you find this life awfully lonely?"

"Not a bit. I shall have my small friend in, with her imp of ugliness, to cheer me up. I cannot tell you what a treat it is to be able to wheel myself in and out as I do; and get so much fresh air."

"What will you do in the winter, I wonder, when I shall have to be away from you! But I won't begin to croak! I only wish I had your patience. I feel such a longing to be up and doing! A little time of this quiet is delicious; much of it would finish me!"

"You have your work, I have mine," said Osmond quietly. "Do you know the verse that cheers me most?"

"No, what?"

"'Strengthened with all might according to His glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness.' With such a possibility as that, how can one grumble?"

"It's lovely!" said Olive with glowing eyes; "and it will fit me as well as you."

Osmond looked at her a little wistfully. Olive had told him in a few words of the difference in her life, and he had rejoiced with her; but such talks were few and brief, for Olive, though bubbling over with amusing chatter about everyday things, was always most silent about the things she felt deepest. She had opened her heart once to Osmond when desperate; she had told him when through the billows her feet had touched the rock; but she could not tell him now of a trouble she

was bravely trying to stamp upon, and a memory that she sought to crush.

Osmond, with the quick eyes of an invalid, noted that her bright laugh and sayings were often assumed; and he wondered if it were only anxiety about the future, that brought a downward curve to her usually smiling lips.

Olive now tucked her letter into her pocket, and joined the old farmer in the porch who was looking—weather wise—over the valley to the opposite side. “A penny for your thoughts, Andrew,” said Olive in her fresh young voice.

Andrew turned with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

“A’m just readin’ out o’ my book, miss,” he said, waving his hand over a portion of the horizon. “’Tis a book o’ the A’mighty’s own, an’ better’n the works o’ men.”

Olive glanced up, and her eyes rested on the fair scene in front of her with pleasure.

It was a still morning; the sky though blue was fringed on the horizon by a thick bank of grey clouds, and it was towards these that the farmer was looking.

“A’m thinkin’ there’ll be rain afore another twenty-four hours!” he said, with a shake of his head; “and a reglar break up of the weather is a-comin’ in a’ll make free to say!”

Then Olive, leaning her arms on an old sundial outside the porch, spoke out her thoughts.

“How I wish I could be so weather wise about my life. I should like to see it mapped out like the country here, so that I could tell which way the clouds would come; and when instead of suddenly being surprised by

a thunderclap when I imagined all signs of storms were over, and sunshine getting clearer every day !”

“We’re on a good height, ye see,” said Andrew, rubbing his head and looking at the graceful young figure by his side with some perplexity.

Olive turned her face round and smiled at him ; a smile that, as the good man described to his wife afterwards, “seemed to burst up all over him like a shower o’ stars !”

“It isn’t till we reach the heights above that we shall see it. Thank you, Andrew !”

Then singing softly to herself, she went out into the garden ; and walking up and down amongst the old-fashioned, sweet-smelling flowers, worked off her anxious troubled thoughts, and went back to Osmond half an hour after, with a serene and smiling face.

A week later and she stood, a slender young figure in black, at the top of the imposing staircase at Crofton Court, waiting to welcome young Mrs. Crofton.

Cora did not show to advantage that first evening ; and perhaps it was unfair to expect her to do so, for she was tired and dispirited with her long journey, and the shock of hearing that Lady Crofton was no longer living seemed to utterly unnerve her.

She was a fair-haired, sweet-faced girl, with gentle voice and demeanour, but with a pair of wonderful dark eyes that seemed to belie the rest of her face, and glowed with a brilliant light through the long lashes and drooping eyelids, that sometimes nearly concealed them from view.

As Olive, with bright words of welcome, drew her into the large drawing-room, and seating her in a

cushioned chair, commenced to pour out a cup of tea for her, she looked wonderingly at her :

“Who are you? Am I not to see Lady Crofton? Excuse my bluntness, but I feel so bewildered.”

Then Olive very gently broke the sad news to her; and Cora began to cry at once.

“Oh, I can’t stay here; Marmaduke told me she would be so good to me. How dreadful, how dreadful, after all I have gone through!”

Olive made her drink some tea; she judged she was tired and unstrung.

“Sir Marmaduke asked me to bring you to him when you felt fit. He will make you welcome as I cannot, and you will find he will be as kind as dear Lady Crofton. You must remember that Duke is his eldest and favourite son, and I think you will find you can be a comfort to him. He is so lonely, poor old man.”

Cora struggled for composure.

“I will go and see him when I have changed my dress. What time do you dine? Need I see him before dinner?”

“Sir Marmaduke dines in his room. He is an invalid. Dinner is at eight, but may I come for you about a quarter to eight? I think he would like to see you then.”

“I feel more inclined to go straight to bed than do anything else,” was the dejected reply. “But I suppose I had better see him then. I don’t know that I have a black dress to appear in. It all seems so dreadful!”

“I will send Baker, Lady Crofton’s maid, to you. She will help you to unpack,” said Olive.

She called for her at a quarter to eight, and very fair and sweet she looked, though her black lace dress was

an old and shabby one. Still she seemed to shrink from the interview, and Olive wondered at it. Sir Marmaduke received her very quietly. He was never able to say much, and his words always were slow in utterance.

"Glad to see you—must be a daughter to me, now I'm left—a daughter like Olive here. And how is Duke?"

It was the question Olive had been longing to ask.

"He is very well. He came to see me off. You know he is going to the front?"

The old man nodded.

"He'll distinguish himself; I've no fears about him. Do you know that scamp of mine—Mark—where is he?"

Cora looked wonderingly at him, then said slowly: "He has gone to Australia, to make his fortune."

"Fool! He had better not show his face in these parts again. Be thankful you have chosen the best of them; if you had been Mark's wife, you'd live to rue it! But in that case you would never have had a footing here. His mother always spoilt him—oh dear, oh dear, what am I saying? and she has gone and left me!"

Sir Marmaduke's voice was husky and uncertain; his head sunk on his chest, and Olive hastened to say:

"Now we're going to dinner, Sir Marmaduke; and you will hear all the news about Duke to-morrow."

She led Cora out of the room, and as they were descending the stairs together she said:

"He is easily excited, poor old man. You had better not mention Mark's name to him, if you can help it. He has always been a trouble to his parents. Sir Marmaduke, I am afraid, will never forgive him for all the disgrace he has brought upon the family."

"I have no desire to talk about him," said Cora with

a little bitter smile, but as Olive preceded her downstairs she scanned her up and down very curiously. It was a strange meal that followed. Olive had been having her dinner in a small morning-room when alone; but now, in honour of Marmaduke's wife, the dining-room, with its large and stately table, was brilliantly lighted; and the two girls, for they were nothing more, took their seats at opposite ends of the table, feeling both forlorn and out of place. Cora of course took the precedence of Olive, and, though apparently unembarrassed and free from shyness, she was strangely ill at ease.

Olive talked on naturally and brightly, asking her many questions about her Cape life, but could get little information out of her. Afterwards, in the drawing-room, over the fire, the girls drew nearer together.

"I suppose," said Olive, in the course of conversation, "you really knew Mark before Duke?"

"Yes," said Cora slowly.

Her voice was slow and soft; and she had a way of looking at Olive through her half-closed eyes, that the latter rather resented.

"Mark was always at our house," she went on in the same measured tones; "and when we heard that a brother of his was coming out, we were naturally rather curious to see him. Marmaduke came to our house to meet Mark, for he was staying with us at the time, and then we saw a good deal of both of them."

"And what made Mark go off to Australia so suddenly?"

Cora looked at her with that slow, curious gaze of hers without speaking for a minute. "Don't you really know?" she asked. "But I suppose Lady Crofton did

not tell you. You see, I do not know how intimate you are with the family ; there are things best not repeated."

Olive felt her cheeks get hot at once.

"Lady Crofton always told me everything," she said, trying to speak quietly ; "I always read her son's letters over with her, but she received a letter just before she died that distressed her very much, and I am afraid it was about Mark. I wondered if you could throw any light upon it, as Sir Marmaduke is as much in the dark about it as I am. The letter was unfortunately burnt, and Lady Crofton did not know it. She tried to tell me the contents of it, and in fact gave me the letter, as she thought, to read ; but it was not the real one."

"That was the Marmaduke's letter I suppose, telling—saying that I was coming to England ?"

Cora leant forward, and her eyes flashed with animated interest.

"Yes ; of course it was a great surprise in every way."

"And what did Lady Crofton tell you ?"

It was Olive's turn to draw back a little now. The suppressed eagerness in Cora's tone was not to her liking.

"Lady Crofton spoke most kindly of you, and asked me to welcome you," she said gravely.

"And nothing more."

"She was distressed about something, but I could not tell what."

"She said nothing else—about Mark and Marmaduke !"

"Nothing but the fact of your marriage with Duke, and that he was going to send you home."

Cora's eyes flashed again for a minute ; then she sank back into her chair again, and half-closed them with a

smile. She said very little after that, and Olive did not press her for further news of Mark. She was rather relieved than otherwise, when Cora, pleading fatigue, went to bed; and then being left alone in the drawing-room, Olive gave way to a weakness of hers, and that was to draw Duke's favourite chair to the fire and seat herself in it. She had seen him so often draw it up to his mother's side; she had so often made one of the trio; and could see him now throwing his head back for a hearty laugh, when perhaps she had been a little extra nonsensical.

Seating herself in it, she laid her cheek caressingly on its cushions.

"For the last time, Duke—the last time. I have no right to it. Your wife will sit here now; I shall only stay in this house as a visitor, and not very often then; and I am not going to think of you any more. Oh, Duke, I have to try to do what I told you to, I have to try to forget you!"

Tears fell; but only the chair saw and knew. Upstairs in the best spare room, Cora was pacing to and fro. She had dismissed Baker rather curtly when that worthy had offered her help, which dismissal hurt Baker's feelings and sent her to the servants' hall in an injured frame of mind.

"She's a sweet pretty young lady is the future Lady Crofton," was the old butler's comment, "and I don't wonder at the Captain's choice."

"Is she quite the quality, do you consider?" queried the upper housemaid, who had a great respect for Triggs' opinion. "I've heard tell 'tisn't the best blood that is brought up in the colonies."



"She's pretty near it," announced Triggs dubiously; "but she don't seem so easy in her manner as she should be. Miss Tracy, to my mind——"

"Ah, Miss Tracy ought to be here as mistress, and I know her Ladyship always hoped she would be."

"Well," said Triggs, "the Captain might do worse; this lady's looks are in her favour."

"Hum!" snorted Baker, coming in at that moment. "It's my opinion, if you ask me, that there are claws under those velvet paws, and they'll be shown pretty quickly."

Oblivious of Baker's newly formed opinion, Cora paced her room with knitted brow. Something was disturbing her mind; and when she raised her head at a fancied knock there was almost terror in her gaze.

"I cannot, I cannot," she muttered with clenched hands. "I have said nothing, it is their doing, and—and fate. Yet what shall I do if the truth is out? It must come, unless—unless—oh, what shall I do? I have nowhere to—I will brace myself up. I must go through with it."

Then her face took a hard look, and she stood at her window, pushing aside the curtains to gaze out. It was a lovely moonlight night; the old lawns and terraces lay bathed in a silver light; and beyond the grounds were the woods and hills. All outside seemed at rest and in harmony with each other. But in this frail young girl, with pale face and dark flashing eyes, there existed two forces at work that night, and the conflict between good and evil raged in her soul. When she turned away from the window at last Cora's resolution was taken and her plans already made.

## CHAPTER XII

### "RUIN AND RIBBONS"

A man can find more reasons for doing as he wishes than for doing as he ought.—*John Ruskin.*

THE girls met at breakfast the next morning rather gravely. Olive, as her custom was, eagerly scanned *The Times* before she came to the table. She gave an exclamation of dismay. "The Boers have sent us an ultimatum," she said to Cora. "If we don't remove our troops by the eleventh, war will be declared. It has come at last. I am afraid you will be very anxious so far away."

"Yes," she assented quietly; "suspense is always most wearing. I try not to think of it."

Olive did not refer to the subject again; but after their meal was over she took Cora over the house and through the grounds. She found her very silent, apparently absorbed in her own thoughts, and uninterested in what Olive tried to tell her.

They were pacing a little winding walk through the shrubberies, and Olive had been pointing out an old oak which had been a favourite tree of the Croftons as boys, and on whose trunk was carved, with many devices, M. C. and M. E. C., when Cora suddenly said with a little laugh:

"You seem on very familiar ground here. Have you known the Croftons long?"

"I never can remember not knowing them," said Olive. "We grew up together as girls and boys."

"And which was your favourite?"

"I don't think any of us cared for Mark," Olive said hesitatingly. "I used to think he was like some malignant changeling. He was never happy unless he was with the grooms and stable boys, trying to smoke and use bad words. I have often wondered why some boys seem to make a wrong start so early in life."

"He never struck me as being such a ruffian," said Cora a little hotly; "and he is decidedly the best-looking of the two."

"Do you think so?"

Olive's dry tone provoked Cora.

"Marmaduke mentioned your name to me," she said, with a little careless laugh. "Were you and he smitten with each other's charms in the old days?"

"That question you had better put to your husband," Olive said with great dignity, though her heart throbbed painfully at the careless words; and making an excuse, she left her in the garden and went back to the house.

She was glad when those first days were over, for something told her that Cora and she would never be friends. And in a day or two young Mrs. Crofton much astonished her by the easy way she took the reins of the household into her hands. She got on capitally with Sir Marmaduke; would sit and talk to him for long about his favourite son. She opened his letters and read them to him, just as his wife used to do; and the lonely old man soon began to lean upon her and consult her in every matter. With the feeling of new-born power Cora's tone

changed to Olive; she no longer appealed to her, but adopted a pleasant little patronising manner, which though highly satisfactory to herself, was very much the reverse to Olive. Within a week Cora had become mistress, and Olive was bidding good-bye to Crofton Court. Old Sir Marmaduke cried when she bid him farewell.

"You are such a good girl—come and see me again—my dear wife always hoped to welcome you here as daughter. I am a lonely old man, every one is going away from me."

"Cora will be here," said Olive brightly. "She is your daughter now."

He cheered up at once.

"Yes, a nice, clever girl, quite fitted for her position. Good-bye, my dear, good-bye!"

Olive went back to Osmond, feeling that the last link with a happy past had been broken; a chapter in her life closed for ever. Yet she bravely took up her daily life, and her voice and laugh rang as clearly as ever it had done. She drew her comfort from an unseen source, and her inner life adjusted rightly gave her time and opportunity for serving others.

She needed all her cheerfulness, for the horrors of war soon crept into every one's thoughts and minds.

It had been long since the dread realities of it had touched so many English hearts and homes, and Duke's safety was in her thoughts night and day.

Andrew and his wife took the war calmly and philosophically; Bess waxed hysterically sentimental over it.

"There be somethin' very wrong in going to war wi'

farmers," said Andrew, shaking his head, as Osmond tried to explain to him the characteristics of the Boer, and the reason for such warfare.

"A can't rightly come at it, why we should leave our own country at all, and fight amongst haythen nations. But there, 'tis nothin' to us, for the wife and me have been too respectibble folks to have belongin's a-soldiering, not but what Bess—foolish craytur'—would have us take note of ev'ry Jack Harry in the lot, if so be they're on the paper. And I don't rightly believe the papers. They're generally writ I hears by chaps who lounge round an' gossips at every corner!"

Bess would seize the morning paper every day after Olive and Osmond had done with it, and her anxiety almost equalled theirs. She followed the first engagement at Glencoe with breathless interest, and sobbed as if her heart would break over the first sad list of casualties.

"I always did have a leanin' towards the redcoats!" she confided to Olive. "It seems so heroic of them to fight for us, and die for their country. I could never do it, that I'm morally certain!"

About a week after Olive's return from Crofton Court, she received a letter from Eddie:

DEAR OLD OLLY,

Don't swear at me, but I'm down in my luck again! I've been a good boy for two months, and thought I was a reformed character, but it's no go. Can you give, lend, or borrow for me £25. It isn't a large sum, but I'm cleared out. I'm an unfortunate beggar, but 'tis my fate. You're such a standby, that I don't think you'll fail me, and I promise it shall be the last time I bother you. Now don't stamp up and down the room and say "I won't!" Because if I don't get an answer to this, I shall turn up at the farm and bully you into

it! I'm longing to have a sight of you, and that's the fact. Old Holmes is a tartar. Keep a soft spot in your heart for

Your incorrigible brother,

Ed.

P. S.—If I have to come, I shall take French leave. How I wish we could be sent to the front! Duke is a lucky dog to be right in the thick of it.

Olive took this letter out into the orchard with her, and her heart sank as once again she viewed the future.

“He will *never* be any different. I have hoped against hope; if he can come to me to supply him with money now, knowing how we are situated, he will come for the rest of our lives. I shall never be free from it, and if I earn anything, all my earnings will find their way into his pocket. He will be a millstone round our necks, and oh, he ought to be different! Our only brother! He will not have mother now to help him so continually; and with all the will in the world it is absolutely impossible for me to keep on sending him £10 notes. What shall I do? If I don't make a stand now, I never shall; and yet if I don't send him it, he will simply borrow from some moneylender, and when once he gets into their clutches it will mean his ruin!”

She sat on a low branch of an apple tree, and pursued such musings with the deepest perplexity. A little voice soon disturbed her.

“Beautiful and me would like to say good-morning, please.”

Olive looked up and smiled at the little white sun-bonnetted creature in front of her.

“What are you doing here at this time of the morning?” she said, drawing the child to her and giving her a kiss.

"We've been running away from wickedness as fast as we could," was the startling assertion, made in the calmest, most matter-of-fact tone.

Ida stood there swinging Beautiful by one arm, and began to kick the daisies away from under her feet.

"Where was it?" asked Olive smiling.

"In the kitchen garden at home. Beautiful asked me to let her look at the raspberries; they was so fat and juicy, and mother said yesterday we was not to pick one, but we looked at them and then we ran into the other garden, but Beautiful would keep going back, and at last, when I was quite sure Satan was behind the bushes and would make us eat them, we just ran straight out along the road as hard as we could, and so we've comed here."

Olive wished that Eddie had some of this little maiden's penetration and purpose. She sighed.

"Where's my Uncle Humbug?"

"He is indoors; he will be coming out soon."

With her finger in her mouth, Ida scanned Olive rather severely.

"Mother *never* sits doing nothing," she said; "are you going to have a cry?"

"Not a bit of it, you little oddity. I am very busy indeed, my brains are hard at work, and if you could see them they would be whirring round at the rate of a mile a minute!"

Ida considered this very gravely, then she propped up Beautiful opposite Olive.

"Beautiful is just so busy as you is! She thinks for ever and *ever*, and her brains is going fifty hundred miles a minute!"

Olive humbly acknowledged her inferiority to "Beautiful," then Ida walked off, calling back as she went: "You and Beautiful can have busy thinks together, and I'll ask Uncle Humbug to talk." Olive found them a little later thoroughly enjoying themselves in the cool parlour. Ida was sipping a glass of milk, and telling Osmond some wonderful experience of hers the day before.

"I'm going over to see Mrs. Wilton, Diogenes. I promised her a book; she has sprained her ankle, and can't get out, so don't expect me back before lunch."

"Isn't it a long way for you?"

"No; I want a walk, and I shall go through the wood. Good-bye."

Mrs. Wilton was the woman she was trying so hard to keep from the drink. When she got to her cottage she found her lying on her bed partly dressed, and looking the picture of woe.

"Well, Mrs. Wilton," said Olive, "how are you? Better?"

"No, and never shall be, miss—it's no good, I tell 'ee. I must have my drop; I've got a burnin' and a cravin' that's simply cruel, and there's that boy o' mine says you would made him promise not to fetch his poor mother a drop! If that's Christianity, I'd rayther be wi'out it, yes, I would, a deal! A-teachin' boys to mock and disobey their parents! And me tied by the leg, and not able to walk a step wi'out screamin' wi' the agony of it!"

She turned a sulky face to the wall, and would not look at the book Olive had brought her. Olive was very tired; for a moment she felt inclined to go away



and leave her, and then she braced herself afresh. She sat down and quietly reminded the poor woman of all her misery in the past; of the longing she had to give it up; and of all the good resolutions on her part to take none of it.

"We have prayed together about it, Mrs. Wilton; and I think perhaps God has sent you this accident to make it easier for you to keep away from it. Do ask Him now to take this craving away. He will do it. Nothing is impossible with Him!"

The woman turned round half-desperate; yet with a wistful expression in her eyes.

"Now, do you really believe, miss, that God can take away my cravin' for it? This minute, right away?"

For a moment Olive was silent; her head was bowed in prayer. Then she looked up, and there was that in her face that brought hope to the poor tempest-tossed soul.

"I do, Mrs. Wilton; for God has said, 'Call upon Me in the day of trouble, I will deliver thee.' Now call, and He will answer!"

Silence again, and then the cry rose, and the answer came.

Before Olive left, Mrs. Wilton was looking and feeling a different creature. She thankfully took some barley water that Olive had brought her; and lay back on her pillows exhausted by emotion, but at rest.

"'Is My hand shortened at all that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver?'" repeated Olive to herself, as she walked back through the shady woods; and then in a flash Eddie's need came before her.

"I have been thinking he is hopeless. God can save

him from this love of gambling. 'Nothing is too hard.' God forgive me, for never believing it before, and for never telling Eddie that there is a remedy for him!" Her face grew bright as she walked along; her lips moved in prayer. "How selfish I have been," she thought; "how ungrateful, how cowardly, not to tell him what I have found; and beg him to seek it too. He once asked me if I had no remedy; no stronger force to recommend him than his own weak resolutions. I remember how puzzled I was, when he likened himself to a swimmer in a strong current; and told me I would not fling him a rope, but only begged him to make a greater effort. And now I know the One who can deliver him, and I have never told him."

She reached home, and found Osmond alone, but she said nothing to him till after lunch; then she gave him Eddie's letter, and asked his opinion on it.

"Ought I to send him something? I have little enough to spare, as you know, and I feel if I send now, I shall have to do so in future."

"I should most emphatically refuse," said Osmond decidedly. "It will be true kindness once for all to let him understand that in your altered circumstances he must not look to you for help. His allowance is much more than what you and Elsie have together."

Olive sighed.

"I hate to refuse him. He won't read my letter if I do, and I want to tell him—what I ought to have done before."

"At any cost be firm now, Olly, or you will bitterly repent it."

"And if he goes to ruin?"

"He'll be much more likely to 'go to ruin,' as you express it, if you go on making it easy for him to spend other people's money. I consider every one of his begging letters is a disgrace to him; you help him to lower himself by listening to them."

"You are hard on him, Diogenes."

"Your spoiling is the ruin of him."

Poor Olive went away to her room that afternoon to compose her letter. It was written with many tears, and yet a thread of hope was interwoven with all the bitterness, as she thought of the possibilities still before this weak and careless brother of hers.

She wrote and rewrote it; and came down to tea worn out with her task.

Yet such were her spirits, that Osmond little guessed from the way she chatted to him through the meal, what a strain it had been to her. Miss March amused them by coming in hastily just before they finished.

"Miss Tracy, did you ever hear the like? Here's Andrew got an invite to a weddin', he and Ann, and he's just bin and said he's goin' in the new black kid gloves he bought for his sister's funeral last December! He got the invite two weeks ago and stuffed it in his pocket, for it was an elegant note from Mrs. Pike that was, and that is goin' to be Mrs. Gregory to-morrow at eleven o'clock at Widford Church, six mile from here, and he never giv' it a thought till Ann was mendin' his pocket and come across it! It comes of bein' so proud of bein' no scholar. And there is Ann, who'll have to stay at home for want of time to trim a new bonnet. But as for him goin' in a funeral pair of gloves, well, no powers on earth will prevent me from circumventin' that, if it

comes to burnin' them to ashes; and so, Miss Tracy, I'm off to the village to see what I can do. I did hear tell that John Sty ordered a pair last May year for his own weddin', and then, bein' too small, he let David Snugg put them in his shop winder, and there may be a chance of him havin' them yet. So not wishing to hurry you, Miss Tracy, I thought I could but see if I could take away your tea things, and then I'll start off at once and get back in time to shut up the dairy."

Olive laughed at her woeful face, but asked her to post her letter, and then went into the kitchen to comfort Mrs. March's heart for not being able to go to the wedding.

"If it is only fresh ribbons in your bonnet, you give it to me and I will see what I can do. I have a lot of scraps upstairs in a box, and I am very clever with my fingers."

"'Tis the love of dress that brings most women's troubles," observed Andrew, with a twinkle in his eye as he sat in his wooden chair enjoying his pipe.

Mrs. March bustled away with a cheerful smile to get her bonnet, though she made many apologies for troubling the "young lady."

"I've a keen likin' to go," she said, "if it's only to see that Andrew behaves himself. 'Tis a shame he never giv' me the letter before."

Andrew chuckled.

"Well, wife, folks should trust their tongues better'n their pens. The A'mighty giv' us one, and 'tis only man has made t'other. Serve Mrs. Pike out for not askin' me proper when I see'd her a week backward."

Olive got the bonnet, and surrounding herself with

ribbons and bits of lace in the sitting-room said to Osmond with emphasis :

“What a medley life is ! A big trouble here, a little disappointment there ; one person’s ruin, another person’s ribbons, occupying one’s time and thoughts, and so the days slip by.”

“Neither ruin nor ribbons would be a healthy atmosphere for long,” said Osmond, putting his book down and looking wise. “Absorption on any one topic is bad for us mentally and physically. A mind soon gets un-  
hinged if it has not change of thought.”

“Go on, Diogenes ; while I occupy my fingers with vanity, give me more of your philosophy.”

“Aren’t our very meals, commonplace and earthly though they be, godsend in time of deep trouble ? We have to put our grief by and exert ourselves in a very distasteful way perhaps, but how good it is for us !”

“I don’t agree there,” said Olive soberly. “We can eat and drink like machines ; it doesn’t give one’s mind a rest.”

“I was thinking of mixing in the general table conversation, which one is obliged to do.”

“Yes, I know what you mean, and how trying it is. How one longs to creep away alone and never see a fellow-creature again.”

Then she added with a laugh :

“But I’m not a misanthrope, nor are you ; and I’m perfectly happy at present leaving all big questions alone and wholly engrossed in my bonnet.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### A LETTER

Ah, for a man to rise in me,  
That the man I am, may cease to be!—*Tennyson.*

“A LETTER, sir.”

Eddie took it from his servant rather eagerly. He was standing by his window, racquet in hand, and lighting his cigarette, before going down to the officers' tennis club.

There were marks in his young face of late hours and fast living. He seemed to have lost some of his freshness and youth already, yet he took the letter with his usual frank smile, that endeared him so to his inferiors in position, and seating himself half inside, half out of his window began to read it.

His brows knitted as he read. Once he made an impatient movement as if to throw it in the waste paper basket, then thinking better of it, spread it out on his knee and read slowly on.

Having read it through, he gazed absently out on the parade ground outside his window, and an onlooker might have surmised that he was deeply interested in a squad of fresh recruits going through their drill.

At last he took his cigarette out of his mouth, and pitched it out on the grass.

“Either she's a big fool or I am!” he muttered. “Now what the deuce am I to do? I counted on her, and for the first time in her life she has failed me. Well,

I was a confounded mean brute to write to her! I richly deserve what I have got. But neither slanging her nor myself will mend my position. Hang it all! I should like to chuck the service altogether!"

He got up, and irritably paced the room.

"Never thought Olly would turn out one of that sort—seems quite hot over it, too! A bad look out for me her taking up that line, for she will have no mercy on any one's failings!"

"Here, Tracy!" shouted another subaltern striding up to the window, and peeping in, "have you gone to sleep, old chap? What's the row?"

Eddie vaulted out of the window with a laugh, shutting away his cares for the time, and proving himself to be, as some dubbed him, "a regular ripper at sport!"

He grew reckless after this, and then one evening the climax came. A Captain Denvers in the regiment was his evil genius. Eddie regarded him with mingled feelings of aversion and attraction; he was entirely in his power, and Captain Denvers made an unscrupulous use of this advantage. He never failed to draw him to the card table, or ply him with drink when he chafed against the curb. And on this particular evening Eddie had drunk long and copiously. A slight dispute over the cards led to Captain Denvers' making some insulting remark. Eddie sprang up and dared him to repeat it. Captain Denvers mockingly did so. Then with a furious blow Eddie laid his captain low on the ground, and Colonel Holmes entered the room at the identical moment. Captain Denvers, half-stunned, was led from the room, and Eddie ordered to present himself before the Colonel the next morning.

When he retired to his room that night, quite sobered by this experience, the boy began to reflect, and face, as he often had faced before, his present mode of living, and the effect it had had upon him.

He was in a very sorrowful and softened mood. Heavily in debt, having committed a crime in the service deserving of court-martial, nothing seemed wanting to fill his cup of remorse. And it was in this frame of mind that he took out Olive's letter once again and read it steadily through.

DEAR OLD BOY,

I have a difficult letter to write, and you must believe that I write every word of it with as much sympathy and love as I have ever shown to you. To come to the point at once, I cannot send you what you ask for. You must remember we are in altered circumstances now, and have no longer the means to do it. As soon as the autumn is over, I shall go out and earn my living, and I am very doubtful whether I shall ever earn enough to keep us going. The time for helping you is past. I was glad enough to do it as long as I had the money, but my godmother's gift is gone, and I have now none to spare. You must *never*—and I write this most emphatically—rely on any help from us again. This sounds hard, doesn't it? And yet, Eddie, if you would only recognise it, it may be the saving of you. As long as you think you can fall back on us, there is the temptation to go ahead. Now you know for a dead certainty you can never expect a penny from us again, you will see how more than ever necessary it is to keep within your income. I quite expect you to tear this letter to pieces at this point, but *don't*. For I have something to say to you. From the bottom of my heart I have always felt, and always will feel, for you in your difficulties. But up to now I have had such a kind of hopeless, helpless feeling that it could never be different, that I have only weakly urged you to "try again" or given you some such platitude as that to encourage you. I remember your saying to me some time ago, that I could recommend to you no stronger force than your own weak resolution, no real remedy for your temptations. Now I write to tell you of a sure and certain remedy, one that will



never fail. I am going to fling you the rope from the banks, instead of telling you to make a greater effort. And believe me, Eddie, I am telling you of something I know, something I have experienced. We have all been brought up religiously as Christians, but I think it has been mere form to most of us. I have found lately that Christ did not only come into the world to die for our sins, but that He is in the world now, in close touch with every one of His people, and that He is the Force that can deliver any one of us from our weaknesses and temptations. *Nothing* is too hard for Him, *nothing* impossible. He is willing to be by our side every minute of the day, reminding, keeping, saving. He works independently of circumstances. He is beyond and above them all, and He enables us to be so too. I know this as a fact in my own experience. He is the Rope. Will you (reverently I mean it) take hold, and be pulled out of all your sins and temptations to the shore? This is not cant. It is a great reality. Put it to the test. The only condition is, that you put yourself in His hands unreservedly, soul and body, and "acknowledge thine iniquity." I am quoting Bible words. Forgiveness comes from the Cross alone, but power comes from it too. It thrills me when I think what your life will be, when you get it in touch with a living, powerful Saviour. I don't want you ever to say, "She knew of a remedy and never told me!" Don't toss this letter aside, but if you doubt the truth of my words, take out your Bible and search for yourself, and find out what the essence of a real living religion is.

Ever dearest Eddie,

Your loving sister,

OLIVE.

Eddie sat with his head bowed in his hands. And in the hush of his silent room a "still, small voice" began to speak to him. Far into the small hours of the night he lay on his bed and listened, whilst in the farmhouse attic, a sister's prayers were going up to the throne of God that he might prove for himself the "unsearchable riches of Christ."

"If you please, miss, there is a strange gentleman asking to see you."

It was Miss March who spoke. Olive was writing

letters in the sitting-room alone, for it being an unusually warm October, Osmond spent most of his days out of doors.

"Ask him in," Olive said, amused at Miss March's scared expression, and wondering who her visitor was. She looked up the next moment to find Colonel Holmes standing before her.

"This is very kind of you," she said a little confusedly; for though a very old friend of the family, and accustomed formerly to be a good bit at her home, Olive always associated him now with Eddie, and dreaded his visits.

"I had great difficulty in finding you out," Colonel Holmes said, seating himself at the window and looking very heated.

"You have never walked all the way from the station this afternoon!" Olive exclaimed.

"Indeed I have, for no vehicle or horse could I get, and I don't think I should have discovered your whereabouts if it hadn't been for a small pinafored damsel giving her doll a bath in a duck pond. She knew your name at once, and accompanied me a part of the way. She was rather puzzled as to what my business was. She asked me if I was a doctor? A most whimsical little person, who informed me the parish belonged to her mother and the church to her father."

Olive laughed, and felt more at ease. She chatted for some little time to Colonel Holmes, answering his questions about the different members of the family. She brought him some lemonade, and suggested going out under the apple trees in the orchard, where Osmond was established.

Then came the dreaded words :

"Well, the fact is, I—er—want to have a few words with you alone about your brother."

Olive's cheeks blanched at once.

"I hope he is going on well," she said, trying to speak steadily.

"He is going to the dogs," was the Colonel's blunt response. "I've tried, for your mother's sake, to do the best for him I can. He is my youngest subaltern, and if he goes on as he is doing, he will be a disgrace to the regiment."

"Oh, Colonel Holmes, I did not know matters were as bad as that! What can I do?"

"We hushed up a little matter the other day," the Colonel proceeded, "so as to give him another chance. I think Denvers was the aggressor, and he begged him off; but discipline must be maintained, and I told him plainly that it is his last chance. If he doesn't steady down now, he never will. I don't want to be hard on him, and I thought I would come over and talk to you about it. Can't you influence him in any way? He always seems to think a lot of his home people."

Olive looked away into the garden, despair seizing hold of her, and as she looked, her eyes grew dim with tears. Colonel Holmes gazed at her in silence. How sweet her profile was! The little stray curls blowing over her forehead, the long, curved lashes touched now with moisture that hid those deep blue eyes. He pulled at his moustache nervously as he watched her and saw her distress. Yet he honestly was much worried over his "youngest subaltern," for reprimand had followed reprimand, and all seemed in vain.

"I'm sorry to have brought you bad news," he said, speaking in a subdued tone. "I assure you I would not have troubled you, if I hadn't been driven to extremity. I have told him if he can't keep himself steady and give up this excessive gambling and drinking, I must—er—request him to leave the regiment, and I have given him one more—but only one more—chance."

Olive was silent, then she turned, and her face though white to the lips, was perfectly under control.

"Thank you for coming to tell me, Colonel Holmes. It is kind of you, for it would have been an awful shock to hear of it from others first. I know what your duty is as a commanding officer, and I would be the last one to wish you to shirk it, on account of old friendship with our family. You have given him yet another chance and I am grateful for that. I feel absolutely helpless. I have written as strongly as ever I can write, but I will make one appeal more. Will you tell me now, as a friend, do you think he would do better in another regiment?"

"Yes, I think he might. Some of our chaps are very go-ahead, and though they can pull themselves up and are smart soldiers with it all, your brother can't, and he is carried with the stream. Yet this may be a lesson to him."

There was silence again. Olive still sat gazing out into the garden, anxious lines showing across her forehead.

Then Colonel Holmes spoke again, very huskily and hesitatingly.

"We have known each other a long time, have we not, Olive?"

She started, looked up and met his eyes; but could not check the words that followed.

"I have felt that perhaps it wasn't fair—a man of my age—to say a word before you had seen something of life. I used to fancy Duke Crofton would be the fortunate man, and I left the field to him, but now he is married, I hear, so I have plucked up courage, and if you would listen to me, my dear, you would make such a happy man of me. I have had you—er—in my heart for years, and no one ever has or ever will be what you are to me."

Poor Colonel Holmes stammered and stuttered out this halting speech in great agitation of mind; he turned red and white by turns, and when Olive turned towards him, he tried to pull himself together and brace himself for her answer, but it was a sorry attempt.

"I am so very, very sorry," she faltered; "but it can never be, Colonel Holmes."

"Oh, don't say so. Take time and think about it. I wouldn't for the world take a mean advantage of my position; but think as my wife how you could help your brother. I thought to myself, as I came along to-day, it would be such a godsend to him, with his sister's house open to him so close at hand, he could not fail to be kept from all that pulls him down—and—as I live—Olive dear—I would give you the best love of my heart—I am a blunt man—and can't put these things well, but I don't believe you would regret the step. Don't give me an answer now; think over it. Write to me."

Olive shook her head, but Colonel Holmes floundered on, then finally, after an appealing glance at her, rose to his feet, watch in hand.

"I must go—must get back by six train. No, not a word, dear; if you have any liking, the merest friendly liking for me, I will wait. I would wait ten years on the chance of your changing your mind. Think it over and write. I can't take a 'no' now."

"Thank you," Olive murmured; "you are too kind," then as he held her hand in his with a tightened grasp, she added: "I will write, and my respect and liking for you as a friend will always remain."

"God grant it will deepen into something more," said the Colonel; and then, not being able to trust himself further, he took a hasty leave, and Olive fled to her room, there to reflect on what had passed, but never wavering in her refusal of her kind old friend.

"It would not really help Eddie," she said; "nothing would. It would place us both in very awkward positions, and I couldn't—oh, I cannot ever marry now! Poor Colonel Holmes, how awkward and distressed he was, and how thoughtless of me to have sent him off to the station on foot again! I wonder if Andrew is in."

She ran down to the kitchen, but met Miss March at the door.

Woman like, she had scented some romance in the advent of this smart, soldierly looking man.

"Ah, Miss Tracy, I am disappointed the gentleman hasn't stayed to tea. I was going to send you in a jar of our home-made raspberry jam. He seemed to be in such a hurry, but Andrew met him at the gate; he was just drivin' in from the village, and when he heard tell he was off to the station he took him up and said he would drive him there himself. Poor Andrew does love a talk with a stranger. I say to him very often he

wouldn't be so leanin' on them for information, and be so easily taken in by those that like to stuff him with travellers' tales, if he were to read a bit. Read a lot and talk a little, is my maxim. But 'tis the other way about with Andrew. Not but what I don't mean to be disrespectful of the gentleman that is gone, Miss Tracy. For such a sad and dejected face I never saw when he come out from your room! And I was sayin' to Ellen—Tea, Miss Tracy? Oh, certainly, at once. You do look so tired like, and a cup of tea always does perk one up!"

Olive went back to the sitting-room, feeling that she could laugh and cry in the same breath.

## CHAPTER XIV

### MYSTERIES

Rumour doth double, like the voice and echo,  
The numbers of the fear'd.—*Shakespeare.*

ONLY a few days after this Olive had another visitor, and one who took her quite by surprise. This was Baker, who had been Lady Crofton's maid. She was so exhausted and tired that Olive would not let her talk till she had had some tea, and then she burst out crying.

"Miss Tracy, I am dismissed! *Me* that my dear mistress promised that should never leave the family until I was past work, and then I should be pensioned. And she used to say, 'Now mind, Baker, if I am taken before your master, you must serve him as you have served me.' And after her death I wrote all his letters for him and used to read them. His valet is a good servant, but a man who is no scholar. Of course, Mrs. Crofton took that out of my hands at once, and it's only right and proper, I know; but when she forbids me my master's room, and he sending me messages to come, what could I do but disobey her?"

Here Baker's sobs overcame her.

"Now, I won't hear another word until you are quieter," said Olive firmly but kindly. "Take your time, but don't cry so; you will make yourself quite ill."

Baker struggled for self-control, and then sat up looking solemn and mysterious.



"Miss Tracy, there is things which I don't like at all; and I've come over to talk it out with you, for I wouldn't breathe it to no one else. I'd do anything for the Captain, he knows I would, but I'm sadly afraid he has been taken in by his lady. Now, two letters to my certain knowledge has come from Mr. Mark for the master—one last week and one yesterday morning. I unlock the postbag myself, as I have always done, and yesterday the master sent for me. Mrs. Crofton was in the grounds, so I just slipped in. He is ageing terrible, Miss Tracy; it's sad to see him. He speaks so much more slowly than he did too, and with such an effort.

"‘I want to see you oftener, Baker,’ he said; ‘you used to talk to me about my boys. They are both lost to me now, I shall never see them again.’ ‘Oh, yes, sir,’ I said, ‘please God, the Captain will soon be back safe from the war, and Mr. Mark will steady down; you’ve heard from him this morning, haven’t you?’ ‘No,’ he said, ‘not one line since he left the Cape, the scapegrace! He must have heard of his mother’s death, and not a line to his lonely old father!’ ‘But,’ I said, ‘Mrs. Crofton had his letter this morning addressed to you, and one came last week.’ He looked at me eager like, then he whispered, ‘I don’t like her, Baker; she thinks me a fool. My speech may be contemptible, my heart and head are sound yet. She tries to manage me; she wants me to alter my will. She will have all she wants as Duke’s wife, she shall not have a personal legacy from me. I don’t understand her.’ And then, Miss Tracy, he grew feeble like and said he wanted you back, and Mrs. Crofton could go, he didn’t want her

any more. I was just soothing him when in walked Mrs. Crofton, and, Miss Tracy, her eyes looked cruel at me, as if she'd like to kill me. Before I could get out of the room the master turned to her quite sharply. 'Was there a letter from Mark this morning?' says he. Her face took a terrified white look just for one second, then she spoke quite calm and decided like. 'No, there was not,' she said; and then she sent me from the room, and half an hour after, she comes to me and gives me warning to leave at once, and she advances me a month's wages. And am I to be ousted from a family which I have served faithfully thirty years, Miss Tracy, I ask you?"

"Oh, I am so sorry," said Olive; "you have not left already, Baker?"

"No, I told her the household would cry shame on her for turning me out into the street, without a roof to cover me, for I've no kith or kin of my own, and I'm given a week, and then I must leave. It's the dear old master I'm feeling for. I can't leave him so; won't you telegraph out to the Captain, Miss Tracy, and tell him to come home. There's lots o' things that is going on that ought not to."

"But I can't, Baker, I don't know where he is; and he couldn't leave his battery when fighting is going on."

"He has written to the master too, once or twice," said Baker with a distressed face. "Of course, Mrs. Crofton has all the letters, and reads bits out, and of course she has a right to have the Captain's, but not Mr. Mark's, and to keep them from the master, and tell an untruth so calmly—why should she do it, Miss Tracy?"

"I don't know."

Olive's tones were troubled; a keen pain smote her for Duke's sake. Was this the wife of his choice? Did it augur well for his future? And when she thought of his hatred of anything mean or dishonourable, she could have groaned aloud. Himself the soul of honour, he perhaps could hardly make allowance for any weak natures, who succumbed to the temptation of prevaricating or concealing in the slightest degree. She remembered as a boy, the only time he had ever lifted his hand against his brother, was when Mark was convicted of a lie, and then he had thrashed him mercilessly, and was in his turn thrashed for having done it, by his tutor.

Baker continued in low mysterious tones :

"But, Miss Olive, this is not all. I must tell you, though it's no one else that has pieced things together as I have. Her ladyship's jewels and the Crofton pearls were in my charge when the dear lady died. I mean to say it was only I that knew the secret of the lock to the jewel case. I thought maybe the lawyer would have taken them into his keeping, but the master told me no, they were safe with me, and I might bring them and put them into his cabinet. I put them in there with the list, and when Mrs. Crofton came she coaxed the master to show them to her. It was when he liked her so, before she had got so managing, and he told her they all belonged to the Captain's wife, that the pearls were an heirloom, and that though they would be hers, she must not wear them till the Captain came back. She seemed wonderful taken with them, and after a time she persuaded him to let her have the case in her keeping, so I never saw any more of them till the other day I

went into her room for something, and she was sitting with the case open and the pearls in her lap, and Miss Tracy, believe me, she started and shook like some guilty thing when I came in, and she turned round upon me like a fury and ordered me out of the door, saying I was always spying and eavesdropping! So I was angry, very angry, and I determined to be a spy to some purpose, and find out what she was up to, and the day after, when she was out, I opened the case and went over the list to see that all was correct as I left them, and, Miss Tracy, the pearls was clean gone, their case was there but not the pearls!"

"Oh, Baker!" exclaimed Olive in real distress, "I would rather you told me no more, you are prejudiced and suspicious. Think of whom you are speaking! Captain Crofton's wife, the future Lady Crofton! I would rather not hear these things. I feel degraded by listening to them. You can't be accusing Mrs. Crofton of stealing her own pearls! Most likely she has moved them to another place. What do you mean?"

Baker met Olive's vehement speech with a stolid face. She had long ago dried her tears, and was now bent on delivering her mind.

"Miss Tracy, I am being turned away; you may say it is spite, but I will speak out to you, though my lips are sealed on this subject to every one else. Mrs. Crofton is a riddle to me. It seems as if she has a craving for money. The master gives her cheque after cheque; he gave her one for Triggs' wages in my hearing, yet a week after Triggs couldn't get his money, and then it wasn't given all at once, only bit by bit! Don't be angry, Miss Tracy, let me speak, there's more to come.

I don't know if you know that Mr. Wells has gone. Mrs. Crofton talked about him to Sir Marmaduke and sent him away, and I will say he was always a handful, for her ladyship used to say so, but a new agent has come now, a Mr. Mordaunt, and Mrs. Crofton has taken him up so wonderfully. He seems to know his business well, but Mrs. Crofton, she's always saying she is going out to talk over things with him. Of course, she's a lady and the present mistress, I suppose, but I don't like to see the Captain's lady walking up and down in the plantation path after dark with Mr. Mordaunt. And it is not only me that has noticed them, for Triggs was coming back late one evening, and he saw their shadows distinctly."

"Well, Baker, you have been such a faithful friend of the family, that I must not be angry with you; but if you have any real love and respect in your heart for Captain Crofton, do try and hush these miserable stories up. Think what he would say if he were to hear you speaking in such a way of his wife! You make me perfectly wretched to hear you!"

Olive had spoken with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, but now she covered her face with her hands, and Baker looked long and wistfully at her; then she said despondently, "It's just a big heartbreak to me, Miss Tracy; but it's the truth—every bit of it! And what it all means, I don't know. I only wish the Captain was back. It wants some one to keep things straight at the Court."

There was silence; then Olive looked up and tried to shake off the wave of depression that seemed to have settled on her spirit.

"I don't know what I can do to help you, Baker, but I will come over and speak to Sir Marmaduke and to Mrs. Crofton. Lady Crofton used to say to me that when you became too old to be her maid, she would make you her housekeeper; perhaps if Mrs. Crofton does not need you as maid, she would find some other niche for you. I will do all I can. I will try and come over to-morrow afternoon."

Baker expressed her thanks, and after a little further talk she departed. Olive sat by the casement window and looked out into the garden with perplexity and grief.

"Oh, Duke, Duke!" was her inward cry; "have you been taken in? What does it all mean? What a future for you when you come home! How will you bear it? It all seems like some hideous dream. And where are you now? Perhaps you will never live to come back." Then her thoughts travelled over Baker's recital; she could not more than half believe it, and she felt ashamed of having been a listener to such talk. She resolved she would say nothing to Osmond about it, but for the present keep it entirely to herself. And then with a little sigh she went out into the sunshine, shaking off her gloom as she did so. It was one of her characteristics that she could do this with perfect ease; her nature was an intensely bright and hopeful one, and not all her troubles and cares that had deepened so within the past few months could rob her face of its vivid brightness and freshness. She found Osmond sketching in his wheel chair. Up on some low branches of an old apple tree opposite, sat Ida with Beautiful as usual in her arms. She was carrying on an animated conversation on the merits of high positions.

"If I had wings, I would always be quite happy. You feel so grown up when you're up high. I like looking down at people, not up, like I have to. Next to being a bird, I'd like to be a giraffe, and then if I went to church I would be quite as tall as father in the pulpit!"

Olive seated herself in a lounge chair by Osmond, and then with a bound and a spring Ida was at her knee.

"Now, Miss Tracy, baby me like I do Beautiful."

"Baby me," meant being taken on Olive's lap and petted.

"You're a spoilt child," said Olive, tenderly taking her up, and ruffling her fair curly hair with her hand. "Does mother like you spending so much time with us here?"

"Oh, yes," nodded Ida; "she says I shan't learn to speak like the villagers if I'm with you; she says you waste the country, what does she mean? Waste means to throw away. You can't throw away all the grass, and fields, and cows, and trees, can you?"

"I expect," said Osmond laughing, "your mother said she was wasted in the country, or something like that, didn't she?"

"Yes, I s'pose she did. What strange old woman have you been talking to?"

"A nice old woman whom I have known for many years," responded Olive.

"When I get to be an old woman," pursued the child with her quick changes of thought, "I shall always sit in a rocking chair and eat peppermints, and I shall have Beautiful dressed in a cap and bonnet just like me, and

we'll knit stockings, and have hot buttered toast for tea, and it will be lovely ! ”

“ Lovely ! ” echoed Olive ; “ I am beginning to envy infant youth and old age, Diogenes. ”

“ Why ? ”

“ It is free from responsibility. ”

“ What responsibility do you want to shirk ? ”

“ That of interference in my neighbour's household. ”

“ Anything wrong at Crofton Court ? ”

“ Baker has been dismissed, and wants me to speak for her. ”

“ Rather a difficult matter won't it be ? ”

“ Yes ; I don't think Mrs. Crofton will thank me. I must go over to-morrow, and see what I can do. ”

“ I wish we could hear from his Grace. These dreadful British losses every day, keep one in an awful suspense. Every one seems to think it will be a very long affair, and he ought to be home—for his father's sake ! ”

A troubled look had stolen into Olive's eyes. Was there a minute of the day, from the time she opened the newspaper in the morning until she laid her head on her pillow at night, that Duke on the veldt, in the midst of all the horrors of war, was not in her thoughts ?

“ He may never come home, ” she said.

“ Who is he ? ” inquired Ida with sudden interest. “ Is he the gentleman who walked along the road, and asked me the way ? ”

“ No darling, this gentleman is fighting out in Africa. ”

“ What a wicked man ! ”

Osmond chuckled.



"He is a soldier, Miss Oddity, it's his duty."

"Oh is he?" Then with glowing eyes the child looked up at Olive.

"I fought Tommy Lane one day all by myself, I did, he called Beautiful names; and I sat her down, and I fought him for ever so long till—he cried!"

"That was very naughty."

"It was—was duty," said Ida in a meditative tone.

Olive shook her head at her.

"Girls and women never fight, never! It is different with soldiers, they do it to protect their queen and country from enemies."

"Beautiful is nicer than the queen," was the stubborn reply; "and Tommy is a wicked enemy, he makes faces, and points his finger at Beautiful, and he runs away when he sees me now. He's as big as me, but I fought him, and he cried!"

"Talk to her, Diogenes, and show her that women must never right their wrongs."

And putting down the child, Olive walked indoors with her heart feeling sore still at Baker's recitals.

The next day she went over to the Court. As she was walking from the station along the well-known road, she met Lord Bannister and his daughter riding. They stopped to speak to her, and Muriel begged her to dine and sleep the night with them.

"We hardly ever see you; it is such a chance!"

"Diogenes would be so anxious," said Olive.

"Nonsense," Lord Bannister said cheerily; "we will take no denial; I will send him a wire. You're only vegetating out at that old farm, and it will do you good to see some of your old friends again. Dot has

been meditating a swoop down upon you for the last week."

All her objections were waived aside, and she finally promised to do what they wished her. Before she left them Lord Bannister said: "Will you be seeing Sir Marmaduke?"

"I hope so. I generally do."

"Of course it is none of my business, but I do not think he has changed for the better with his present agent. I see he is cutting down a quantity of timber at the top of his covers. I wonder if he knows it. It will ruin that bit of his property. I did say to the fellow that it was a pity, and asked him if Sir Marmaduke had ordered it. He was very stiff, and said that everything was in Mrs. Crofton's hands now, and she knew about it. I'm afraid she is very inexperienced in such matters. Lady Crofton was the one who could tackle business affairs!"

"Father," said Muriel reproachfully, "you will make Olive think you are a regular busybody. The Croftons needn't ask our advice about their timber. Now come along, and we shall see Olive later."

But those chance words brought a shade to Olive's face as she walked on. And when she reached the stone bridge that she knew so well, the old heartache came back with a rush.

"Oh Duke, Duke, if only you were here! And yet how could I bear to see you with your—your wife!"

She stood looking over the low wall into the flowing river. There are some scenes that we go through with careless indifference at the time, little thinking that they will be indelibly stamped upon our memories for the rest

of our lives. She saw herself on that bright spring morning, now so very long ago, as she stood defiantly in front of one who was throwing his whole soul into the words he uttered; the words which she treated with such light scorn at the time. She saw him standing in his strong manhood; she could almost feel the close, masterful clasp of his hands as he imprisoned hers in his. The tone of his clear ringing voice, with the touch of wistful tenderness in it, and the earnest gleam in his clear grey eyes as he said: "Olive, I do not believe you know your own heart,"—it all came back to her now with vivid intensity. She again recalled her mocking little speech, and heard the quickly-caught breath with which he dropped her hands and turned away. "Oh what a fool I was! What a mess I have made of my life!" she exclaimed, for a moment quite absorbed in remorse for the past. Then her thoughts took an upward turn. "I will not let it spoil my life. God has my future in His hand; I can trust Him and be content." Then resolutely she turned her thoughts to the present and walked rapidly on.

## CHAPTER XV

### FAMILY JEWELS

The varnish of power brings forth at once the defects and the beauties of the human portrait.—*Lord Lytton.*

TRIGGS met her in the hall.

"The master has been asking for you lately, ma'am," he said. "He will be very glad to see you."

"Tell him I will come to him," said Olive brightly; and then going upstairs she found Cora writing at the davenport in the drawing-room. She started when she saw who her visitor was, and came forward very coldly.

"I am surprised to see you," she said. "It is a good thing I happen to be in, for you might have had your journey in vain. Why don't you send us a card beforehand, so that we may know when to expect you?"

"I thought I would take my chance," said Olive pleasantly. "How is Sir Marmaduke?"

"Rather poorly."

"I am sorry. Have you had any news from the Front?"

"We have had one letter. Marmaduke is with Sir George White, but it was written before the actual fighting began."

"Then he has been all through Talana Hill and Elandslaagte? I have been looking for his battery. Where is it now? I haven't seen it mentioned in the paper."

Olive spoke eagerly, and Cora eyed her curiously.

"We are thankful not to see his name in the casualty lists. He is with Sir George White. I cannot give you further details."

"You take it coolly. I envy you!"

"You seem to take a peculiar interest in Marmaduke?"

"I don't think it is a peculiar one. I should say it was a very natural one, as I have known him all my life. I feel as much for him as I should do for my own brother."

Olive was conscious that her cheeks were flushed, and Cora's quiet smile as she noted it too did not help towards composure.

"You must be longing to have him here," said Olive after a minute's silence; "Sir Marmaduke ought to have one of his sons at home to look after things. Dear Lady Crofton did so much when she was alive; but no one can take her place now, and every time I see Sir Marmaduke his feebleness strikes me afresh."

"Yes," assented Cora rather sweetly; "he is not up to much exertion, and he cannot receive visitors as he used to do; it always seems to unnerve him. I shall tell him you have called, he likes to hear of people, though he cannot see them."

"I think he will see me," was Olive's quiet response to this statement, "for my call was really on him to-day."

"I am sorry—" began Cora with an angry light in her dark eyes, but the door opening stopped further speech. It was Triggs, who addressed Olive: "The master would like to see you now, ma'am."

Olive got up without another word and left the room, Cora following her closely, and plainly showing her annoyance.

"He will suffer afterwards for this," she said, trying to speak quietly; "I must beg you not to stay long."

Olive said nothing; she was reserving all her courage for what she had to say. She found Sir Marmaduke brighter than usual, and he looked unfeignedly glad to see her.

"I wish you would come oftener," he said; "all my old friends are dropping away, and I am a lonely old man."

Olive chatted brightly to him on different subjects. Cora sat in an easy chair with rather a haughty and indifferent air, occasionally joining in the conversation. Presently Olive said, half turning to her, "I have come to-day specially to plead Baker's cause, and to ask you and Sir Marmaduke if, in consideration of all her years of faithful service, you could not find some other niche in the house for her?"

"Baker is not going?" Sir Marmaduke exclaimed hastily.

Cora's face was not pleasant to look at; but before she could speak Olive continued, "I know you will not like my interference, Mrs. Crofton, and I am sorry for it, but hearing the facts I felt obliged to come and tell you what perhaps you do not know. Lady Crofton promised Baker that when she got too old to do her duties as maid, she should be made housekeeper. I was wondering whether this would make a difference in your decision. It is natural that any one should prefer to have a younger maid about them, but if you could keep

her on in any other capacity it would be a great kindness. The poor woman is nearly heartbroken about it."

"Certainly she must not go," said Sir Marmaduke; and his voice rang out clearly and decidedly. "Why do you wish to send her away, Cora?"

"I think, father, these matters are best discussed between ourselves, when we are alone," said Cora, in a tone that vibrated with quiet anger; "I am not dismissing her without cause, and it would have been best for herself if she had gone quietly without a word."

"She must not leave," Sir Marmaduke said querulously; "I like to have her in and out attending to me. Why do you want her to go?"

There was silence for a moment. Olive had said her say, and awaited the result with trepidation. But she was hardly prepared for Cora's explanation.

"Father, do not distress yourself. I am exceedingly sorry that this matter has been brought before you. It will only worry you, and I do not like mentioning it even before Miss Tracy. I am afraid, like many others, Baker has succumbed to the temptation of appropriating things of her late mistress's to herself. I have no actual proof of this, so have dismissed her without a word; but she has tampered, I fear, with some of Lady Crofton's jewellery. Several small things are missing."

Sir Marmaduke leant forward in his chair eagerly.

"Impossible! I cannot believe it! Bring the case here at once, Cora; send for it! My dear wife's jewels! What are missing?"

"There is no need for me to trouble you with it, father," began Cora, changing colour a little; "you will be ill if you excite yourself."

Sir Marmaduke cut her short. He seemed to gather strength from Olive's silent presence.

"Bring the jewel case to me. I ought never to have let it go from my possession. It is too great a responsibility for you, my dear. When your husband returns it will be all right, but until then I shall keep it. Send for it at once."

And he would not be quieted till the jewel case was brought in. Olive, indignant at the accusation against Baker, determined to stay till the matter was sifted. And yet, when she saw Cora's unconcealed agitation, and realised how much might result in this visit of hers, she wished she had never come, for she felt it disloyal to the absent husband to harass and distress his wife in such a way.

Sir Marmaduke insisted upon looking through the contents of the case himself. "I'm not quite a fool," he kept muttering to himself, and indeed he appeared to know every article on the list. It was touching to see him fingering the diamond ring that he had first given his wife on their betrothal so many years ago. The pendant of brilliants she had worn on her wedding-day was gazed at with misty eyes, and then came an inquiry for the pearls. They were not forthcoming, but Cora quietly accounted for their absence.

"You remember that the clasp was a little out of repair. When I was in town last week I took them to the jeweller's to have it repaired."

"But—" stammered Sir Marmaduke, "you really should not have done that without consulting me. Do—do you realise the value of them? It is a serious matter to have them out of our hands at all."



"It was because I did understand the value of them that I took them myself," replied Cora. "I knew they could not travel by post. I could not ask you, for it was one of your bad days, and you sent me a message to say you did not wish to be disturbed. If you remember, you told me you intended to have the clasp repaired."

"I am sure I forget," Sir Marmaduke replied a little testily. "You ought to have asked me of course. I presume you took them to J——, in Bond Street?"

"Yes."

"I shall be quite anxious till they come back, but J—— can be trusted. Well—well—let us go through the list. Now what is missing?"

Cora bent over the case, and, after a little hesitation, pointed out that a turquoise and pearl brooch and pendant were not there.

"But, bless my soul!" ejaculated Sir Marmaduke, "don't you remember I took those out before I gave you the case, and told you I should give them to Olive here! I'm glad I am reminded. Open my top cabinet drawer and give me that small box. You have been making a fuss over nothing!"

Cora flushed a little.

"It quite escaped my memory. It is a relief. I was quite worried, and Baker declared she had never seen them. How stupid of me not to remember!"

She looked quite relieved, and got the little box which was handed over to Olive at once.

"Keep it in remembrance of my dear wife, she was very fond of you. We always thought you would be our daughter. Oh dear, I am a lonely old man!"

Cora shot a keen glance at Olive through her half closed eyes. Sir Marmaduke had put into words what she had already conjectured; and she did not like Olive the better for it.

And then, after thanking the old man gratefully for his gift, Olive rose to go.

"I am so glad," she said heartily, "that Baker is cleared, I felt sure that there was a mistake somewhere."

"Of course, of course—Baker must come in and look after me sometimes, if there is no work for her to do."

And having, as he thought, settled the matter, Sir Marmaduke dismissed it from his mind. He made Cora put the jewel case in his cabinet, and then the two girls left him.

Cora gave Olive her hand and wished her good evening, but not a word more did she say; and Olive felt very doubtful as she left the house as to whether she had done Baker harm or good by her interference.

Cora watched her go down the drive from the drawing-room windows.

"I hate her!" she said stamping her slender foot; "she shall not thwart me, or spoil my plans! She loves Marmaduke, and I wonder she dares keep a footing here under the circumstances!"

Then the angry light died out of her eyes, and an harassed hunted look took possession of them.

"I am not cut out for a villain," she murmured; "I haven't the self-possession. I am simply driven against my will—oh if they only knew! I think even Olive would pity me!"

Olive reached Blackenbury Manor in time for five

o'clock tea. Muriel had just come in from her ride, and her bright words of welcome came as a cheer after the uncomfortable atmosphere at Crofton Court.

"Now sit in that comfortable chair you dear old thing, and I will pet you a little. I never used to see you look so grave. Father is out, so we will have a nice little chat. There, you're smiling at last; now you are your old self! And here's a cup of tea and my favourite hot cakes. Now guess who I saw last week?"

"Man or woman?" queried Olive, quite recovering her spirits.

"Man. I think he considers himself so!"

"I'm sure I can't guess. Where were you?"

"At the Wingate's dance."

"Not Eddie?"

"Yes, Eddie. Several of his regiment were there. I sat out a dance with him for the sake of old times, and we had rather a serious talk. Have you heard from him lately?"

"No," said Olive slowly, "not since I wrote him a letter nearly three weeks ago."

"I expect you will hear soon. And yet I don't think it will be betraying his confidence if I tell you, for I think it is the result of your letter. He is going to try to exchange into another regiment."

"Oh I wish he would. I have wanted him to for a long time."

Muriel gave a comprehensive little nod.

"He is a dear boy," she said with a little grandmotherly air. "I tried to give him good advice, for I think he is really going to steady down. He said something that rather surprised me. I remarked that it was

better to pull up at the top of a hill than at the bottom. And he said quite gravely, 'But if you are so on the incline that you can't pull yourself up, it is good to have a stronger power than yourself to stop you!' And he looked—well—as if he were in church, Olive, as he said it."

A great hope leaped up in Olive's heart at these words.

Muriel went on with a little laugh —

"I assure you we talked like an old man and woman for about half an hour, and then to make sure we were after all still quite young, we had a dance together and talked nonsense for the rest of the evening. Now tell me about yourselves. How is Elsie?"

"They are just coming back to London. Elsie is radiantly happy. She has as she says unfurled her petals, and discovered that she is no longer a common field flower!"

"I always knew Elsie had a lot in her, but I think she will get tired of town soon. I know I did. One season was quite enough for me."

"Oh you're a Bohemian by nature!"

"Yes I am; and I am longing to be off somewhere again. Perhaps our next trip will be to Abyssinia!"

"Oh Dot, surely not!"

"I hope so, but father will not go till next year, he says."

They chatted on, and presently Lord Bannister came in. Olive always enjoyed herself at the manor. Father and daughter were charming in their conversation. Culture and travel, with originality combined, served to make them always entertaining to their friends.

But Lord Bannister's face was very grave, as he came towards the girls.

"Bad news from the Front," he said. "I have just seen Hawkins who has come down from town. The evening papers are full of it. A disaster at Nicholson's Nek. Numbers of the Gloucestershire and Royal Irish Fusiliers have been made prisoners, both officers and men. They fought hard before surrendering, but were quite cut off in the hills. Hawkins has a nephew who has been killed."

"I wonder if Duke Crofton was in it?" said Olive trying to speak quietly.

"A battery of the mountain artillery has surrendered, but Crofton's battery is not mentioned."

Olive breathed again.

"How dreadful it seems," she said, "while we are at home in peace and comfort, to have our soldiers fighting out there day and night, hour by hour, without cessation."

"White will be surrounded," said Lord Bannister. "He hasn't a strong enough force with him. If only we had sent our reinforcements out quicker, we shouldn't be at such a disadvantage! But Buller will be arriving to-morrow. We must hope he will do something." Little was talked of now but the war. Lord Bannister knew a good bit about South Africa, and he was not sanguine about the future.

"The war will last for six or eight months. We have no idea of the power of our enemy. The Boers have been preparing for this for years."

After dinner Muriel forbade any more "war talk" as she called it. She went to the piano, and began playing

some of her soft weird symphonies. Olive listened with keen enjoyment, and when she had left the instrument, said with a little sigh :

“ I always envy people with such a gift as yours.”

“ You sing, Olive ! ”

“ No, I have given it up. I knew I should never do much at it professionally, and I was too busy. I am a very useless creature in the way of accomplishments ! ”

“ Nonsense ! I believe you could do anything you chose,” said Muriel impetuously.

Olive laughed.

“ I am a practical matter-of-fact person. I don't care for fancy work, I don't sketch or paint, or play, or compose verses or write. I think I can cook and housekeep, and perhaps nurse ; and I like a book, and a garden for recreation ! ”

“ Better fitted for a wife than a spinster,” said Lord Bannister with a twinkle in his eye.

“ No,” said Olive with a corresponding gleam in hers. “ Men don't stay at home enough to appreciate such qualities as I possess. They dine at their clubs, they go to private hospitals when ill, and there is nothing they hate more than to see their wives engrossed in books ! ”

“ The poor beggars are being taught to seek their bodily comforts out of their homes. The present generation of young people are not sufficient contrast, one to the other. A man doesn't care for his wife to have her town club, her golf, her croquet, her cricket in the same style as he has himself. As an old lady once said to me, ‘ There's an inside and an outside to every home, let the woman keep inside, and go out only for her rec-

reation, let the man keep outside and come inside for his ! ' "

"Then if I were a wife I should be having my recreation all day," said Muriel with a saucy little toss of her head, "for I never could be shut up in a house long together ! "

"How do you and Mrs. Crofton pull together ? " Lord Bannister asked, turning to Olive.

"I think she is a very capable person," said Olive slowly.

"Yes," assented Muriel ; "but I cannot get on with her. I called, and she has returned the call, but our intimacy has ended there. I suppose we ought to ask her to dine, but to tell the truth, I am a little afraid of her. She is so stiff and conventional. Very nice looking, but hardly the woman that I should have thought would have attracted Marmaduke. I don't think she will be popular here. She has dignity, but not graciousness ; and always seems to be keeping a watch upon herself, like some half-bred person ! "

"Don't begin to pick each other to pieces, or I shall leave," said Lord Bannister good naturedly. "Did you leave a word with Sir Marmaduke about his timber, Olive ? "

"No, I really felt I couldn't interfere. Why don't you talk to him about it, Lord Bannister ? You are one of his oldest friends."

"Perhaps I may some day. Duke ought to be home ; it wants one of the family to have an eye on this new agent. I don't half like his looks ; a black-bearded fellow with shifty eyes and a mumbling voice. Can't think where he came from ! "

"Who is picking a person to pieces now, father? Show Olive some of our curiosities, from the Rocky Mountains; she hasn't seen them yet."

They adjourned to Lord Bannister's small museum, and for the rest of the evening Olive tried to vanish Crofton Court from her memory. Eddie was much in her thoughts when she retired to rest. She had, as she told Muriel, heard nothing of him lately. She had written to Colonel Holmes, as kindly and gently as she felt towards him; and had received from him one line in reply:

"I bow to your decision, and am bearing my disappointment like a man—God bless you and bring you happiness.  
J. H."

But not one word of her brother. She continued to pray for him, with fresh hope and earnestness, and Muriel's words brought her much comfort.



## CHAPTER XVI

### “ON ACTIVE SERVICE”

He husbands best his life, that freely gives  
It for the publick good.—*Quarles*.

VERY anxious were the days that followed. All England, from the poorest peasant to the proudest peer, knit together by the bonds of sympathy and breathless interest in their dear ones' fate in Africa, watched with tense, strained hearts the events so meagrely telegraphed from the seat of war. The wave of patriotism and enthusiasm for the military calling that rolled over the country from shore to shore astounded and dumb-founded the Socialistic agitators and reformers. Bow-legged, narrow-chested Cockneys crowded to enlist, shoulder by shoulder with the younger sons of our nobility. The reserves cheerfully left their wives and families and comfortable situations, and eagerly demanded to be sent to the front at once. And day by day the sad lists came over, bringing bereavement to rich and poor, old and young. There were those who had a right to mourn, and who received much loving sympathy from their friends. There were also those—and these chiefly young fair girls—who watched the papers with blanched cheeks and throbbing hearts, yet never said a word; and when the name they looked for appeared amongst the dead would realise the bitterness of a blank and empty life, and would be taken to task by their undiscerning relatives for their dullness and lack of interest in the war.

When Sir George White with his whole force, Duke amongst it, was finally shut in at Ladysmith, Olive's anxiety was great. She could not understand Cora's philosophical way of taking it, and even Osmond was restless and ill at ease.

Miss March seemed to revel in all the horrors of the papers; she would go about the house with streaming eyes.

"Ah, the dear, noble fellows! Would that I could go out and nurse them! If I were a man, I would never rest quiet till I was fighting amongst them."

She relieved her feelings by knitting caps and belts by the dozen, and Olive, who undertook to send them up to a friend of hers collecting, was much amused to find that inside each article, written in marking ink on a piece of tape, were the words: "From a humble admirer of the army."

Olive herself, anxious at this time about many people and matters, astonished Osmond by her bright, brave demeanour. One afternoon she arrived in the sitting-room glowing and breathless from a walk. Dancing across the room with all her old spirit and grace, she burst forth excitedly:

"Fortune has favoured me, Diogenes! I'm to be a drone no longer, but a busy bee, and I have a vocation at last!"

"Three cheers! As long as your vocation is in this part of the world!"

Olive perched herself on the window ledge and proceeded:

"I have got so accustomed to my burden, that now it is dispensed with, I feel rather intoxicated. Forty

pounds added to my little income will keep me here in clover. My dreams of a typewriter in a London garret, with gas within and fog without, will not come true, and I shall settle down for good and all in this abode of peace."

"How on earth are you going to make forty pounds?"

"Guess."

"You have been to the Rectory, haven't you?"

"You are getting warm."

"Are you going to edit a parish magazine?"

"I will put you out of suspense. Our small friend was found yesterday in a public-house taproom—the 'Crown and Thistle'—I'm not sure whether she and Beautiful weren't executing a small dance, but anyhow her father found her there and brought her home with an overflowing heart. He had two hours' talk with his wife last night, and she tells me she never slept a wink in consequence. I found her almost in tears this morning over the *Times* advertisement sheet, trying to concoct an advertisement for a resident governess. 'I can't bear strangers in the house,' she confided to me, 'and yet I must have a resident governess. The child has run wild too long. I know the governess will prove a trial in our house. She will say, as all my wise friends say, that I neglect my household and my husband neglects his parish. She will bring an element of discord amongst us. My husband thinks she might help me with my club accounts and do a little parish work as well, but if she is to have sole charge of Ida she will have her work cut out. I never could manage the child, and she knows it, and her independence is past a joke.' 'What are you going to give the governess?' I asked out of idle

curiosity. 'Forty pounds a year—we can afford that, and I want a lady and a well-educated person to teach her.' Then half in fun I said, 'I wish you would let me be her governess and help you in the parish.' You should have seen her face! She was quite ecstatic; marched me off to her husband's study, where we had a long consultation, and the thing is settled. I am not to sleep in the house, but I am to be there every day from nine o'clock till half-past seven, when she goes to bed, and I am to have sole charge of her. Do you think the dear mite will begin to hate me?"

Osmond looked at her with a twinkle in his eye.

"You will have your hands full. Little Miss Oddity running about the parish, and popping in and out upon us of her own sweet will, is a very different creature to Miss Oddity sitting up at a schoolroom table, with books and slates before her, and a governess who is determined to be the victor in every encounter."

"I shall never have any encounters!"

Osmond gave a low whistle.

"Now don't discourage me. I know I am not cut out for a governess by rôle, but Ida is a dear child, and I know I have sufficient knowledge to teach her for some years to come. If I can't manage her I shall bring her over to you. Mrs. Hunt is delighted to have me. I can't tell you how worried I have been lately thinking over my future, and this seemed a perfect godsend to me!"

"It is that," said Osmond gravely; and Olive's face reflected a little of his feeling, as she said with a catch in her breath—

"Yes, I have been faithless and fearful. I have

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prayed so much, and yet now the answer has come I am astonished."

"Has your new pupil been told of the proposed plan?"

"Not yet. I am to start work next Monday. Do you know, Diogenes, Mrs. Hunt is a wonder to me. She is a charming woman, real and true to the backbone, and plenty of character, yet I believe she stands in terror of her baby daughter. A helpless look comes into her eyes when she talks to her, and Ida puffs herself out like a tiny bantam cock, and eyes her mother with wondering amusement. I am afraid there is truth in her saucy words to me a little time ago, 'mother has the parish to manage, she can't manage me too, she doesn't have time!'"

"Mrs. Hunt does certainly seem chock full of other people's business."

"She was telling me to-day how the whole village is waking up over the war. From having a supreme contempt for any soldier, they are now lamenting that they have not a single representative at the front. Two lads have walked off to B—— to enlist, and Mrs. Giles is being persecuted by visits and numerous inquiries after her son. They cannot understand why he is not fighting, and make slighting remarks about his youth and stamina, and when she told them his regiment had not got orders to leave, they insinuated that it was a poor lot of officers and men to be left behind, when even the volunteers and militia were being taken! I am wondering myself how soon Eddie will be off to the front. I dread to hear of it, and yet in some ways I shall be glad."

"It will be the best thing for him, and for many another idle young fellow," said Osmond warmly. "I believe years of peace have a deteriorating effect on some of our regiments. Discipline gets slack; men get out of touch with their officers, and grumbling—sometimes mutiny—is the order of the day! Active service binds all in the regiment together, as we see in the papers daily. It makes careless fellows into heroes; officers and men save each others' lives at the cost of their own. It brings out all the pluck, grit and chivalry that we Britishers pride ourselves upon."

"Very true, Diogenes, but I have no time for a discussion upon the war. My mind is selfishly engaged with my own affairs. I am delighted to have found some occupation."

Olive left the room as she spoke, and Osmond heard her singing in the garden, in the very abandonment of her heart.

Creases smoothed out of her brow; and her gay spirits showed only too plainly what anxiety had been removed from her mind.

The very next morning the long-looked-for letter came from Eddie. It was a short one, but in it he told her that he was going out to the front on special service, and he was coming down that afternoon to wish her good-bye.

"It seems strange," she said to Osmond at the breakfast table, "that I should be glad and thankful for him to go; but it will be a complete break from all his present temptations, and it looks as if that were his desire."

"It will be the making of him, as I said yesterday," was the quick rejoinder.

So at half-past two that afternoon, Olive borrowed the farmer's trap, and drove herself to meet her brother at the station.

The farmer, with wife and sister, saw her off at the gate.

"Hold the mare well in, Miss, we can't have you run away wi'!" said Andrew good naturedly, adding with a chuckle, "leastways not wi' four-legged critturs; there may be a chance for another sort, but a right good sort it must be, or us shan't let 'ee go!"

"How vulgar Andrew is at times," said Miss March with a little snort, as Olive looked back and laughingly nodded to the farmer. "To speak to Miss Tracy as if she be one that favours the men! They be below her understanding and liking altogether, at least judging her by my own experience, and that's not a small one, after being in London so many years, where men is as thick as black beetles and as common!"

"Ah well," said Mrs. March with a cheerful smile, "'tis a poor house that hasn't a master in it, and I shall look to Miss havin' a grand weddin' one day—when the right man comes! And I wonder to hear you cry down men so, Bess, for lately you've been all for the soldiers!"

"I was speakin' of the generality o' men," said Bess, looking a little confused. "Soldiers is one thing, ordinary men is another. If Miss Tracy is ever wed, and to a noble military officer, I shall have no word to say against it!"

It was a very undemonstrative meeting between brother and sister; but when in the trap, and driving through the quiet lanes, Eddie, with his characteristic frankness, plunged into it at once:

"Here give us the reins, Olly. I hate to let a woman drive me. Were you surprised at my news?"

"Very thankful."

"I knew you would be. Old Holmes has managed it for me; at my request, mind you, though I believe the old chap will be mightily relieved to see my back! I won't say anything about fresh starts and chances, you must be rather sick of the rot I've talked, but time will show whether this will be a good or bad move on my part."

"Why didn't you write and tell me sooner?"

"I was waiting till it was all settled. I haven't been great in correspondence lately, have I? Do you remember when it was you wrote?"

"A long time ago, but I haven't forgotten you."

"No—your letter did the business, old girl. It riled me immensely at first; it gave me some sleepless nights later."

There was silence, then tightening the reins a little, Eddie said shortly, looking straight in front of him:

"I think you'll like to know, that I believe I have got hold of the rope at last!"

Olive could not speak. She had longed; she had hoped for this assurance, but now it was given her, it seemed overwhelming. She fought hard against tears; at last she said tremulously:

"Then you, as well as I, have a sure foundation under your feet."

"It is a new life altogether," said Eddie, with an earnest gravity in his tone that had never been there before.

Then he turned to talk of his future prospects, and



as they drove on in the golden autumn sunshine, Olive's heart throbbed with joy and gratitude.

"Are all my cares slipping from me?" she thought; "just as I had begun to think they were increasing rather than lessening." And half-unconsciously, she quoted to herself:

"I said, 'The darkness shall content my soul!'

God said, 'Let there be light!'

I said, 'The night shall see me reach my goal.'

Instead—Came dawning bright!"

Osmond was delighted to see the young soldier. He never complained, but a longing for men's companionship and society often held him in its grip. Life in all its activity, and youth in its strength and courage, had a strange fascination for him. He listened to Eddie's future prospects with a glowing heart.

"I envy you!" he said heartily. "When do you sail?"

"On Saturday. Old Holmes is pretty sick the regiment has not been ordered out yet! We've all been warned, but the War Office know how to take their time. Anyhow I'm off. I shall be in London tomorrow, and shall have a glimpse of Vinny and Mother Mumps—who is Mother Mumps no longer, by-the-bye. Has she been down here yet?"

"No, but they both talk of coming for a day, next week. Do beg them to do it, if you see them. I am longing to see Elsie again."

"She is a young lady of fashion. Isn't it queer after all these years that old Randolph should tolerate one of his wife's belongings for so long? I was up in town a fortnight ago, and I assure you Mother Mumps is all

the rage! Oh, who do you think I saw yesterday, Olly? I was over at Blackenbury, paying my farewell visit at the Manor, and on the way back, his Grace's wife came on the scene."

"Haven't you seen her before?" asked Olive a little indifferently.

"No; what a pair of eyes she has! Lord Bannister was walking back to the station with me, and we struck across the Crofton's wood. It was rather an awkward *rencontre*. She was in very close conversation with a black-bearded fellow—the new agent I was told—and it looked uncommonly like a bit of bullying on his part. She didn't see us coming, but was shrinking away from him almost in fright; and I heard her say 'I can't do it! You must get it back! It will kill me to go on like this!' Then she saw us. The man turned away at once, and slunk off, but she faced us with an air of a tragedy queen. 'Are you aware this is a private path?' she said. Old Bannister doffed his hat to her. 'I have the privilege of using it, being an old friend,' he remarked. Then she knew him and dried up, but Bannister engaged her in conversation and introduced me. She has a good figure, but where on earth did his Grace pick her up? And what is the little game this new agent is trying to play with her? It looks very fishy!"

"I wonder," said Osmond slowly, "if he is some needy relation of hers. She engaged him, and he may be sponging on her."

The same thought had struck Olive, but she did not say so.

"I hope his Grace hasn't made a hash of it," said Eddie lightly.

"Oh no, no! And don't talk about her, will you? She is unknown, and unprotected here. For Duke's sake, don't let suspicion rest on any of her actions!"

Olive spoke with heat, and her brother, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, changed the subject. She was called away by Miss March in a few minutes, who was preparing an elaborate tea in honour of the visitor.

Then standing up by the window Eddie spoke abruptly:

"Olly ought to have been his wife. I always thought they would hit it off."

"She did not think they would," Osmond said.

Eddie was silent, then he said:

"She's a good sort—Olly is—worth six of Mother Mumps! And I can tell you that woman is up to mischief at the Court! I should say she was an adventuress. Old Bannister shakes his head over her. It passes my comprehension how his Grace could have got entangled with her!"

"I have wondered if there were any peculiar circumstances, anything that appealed to his chivalry more than to his heart. He was head over ears in love with Olly, and is not the man to change so soon!"

"Oh well—the colonies have a deal to answer for. There was a chap in the 4th Dragoons I came across, a thorough nice-hearted fellow; he came back from India or somewhere—I forget the exact spot, with an awful old hag, old enough to be his grandmother! He told me, with tears in his eyes, that he hadn't an idea how it was done! He was very cut up because a cousin of his had jilted him, and was lonely and out of sorts and she mothered him a bit, and got round him till he

found himself a married man! If I come across his Grace I shall get the rights of the story, I expect!"

As Eddie was leaving the house a short time after, Miss March pressed forward in the passage with flushed cheeks and excited eyes.

"Pardon me, sir," she said; "but I have been told you are going to the war. Our brave soldiers live in my thoughts day and night. I know you will pardon my presumin' to ask such a favour, but we live out of the times here, and I never thought to see one in the flesh who was going straight out to engage in such fierce battles! May I ask the honour of shakin' the hand that will be wieldin' the sword?"

Eddie laughed out in his frank boyish fashion. Miss March's little bows as she made her speech were comical in the extreme.

"Here is my fist," he said good humouredly; "and wish me well."

He gave her a grip which made her wince. Tears came into her eyes.

"A safe journey, sir, a victorious encounter with your foe, and a glorious return to the home of your forefathers!"

After which carefully prepared speech Miss March retired to the kitchen in a state of bliss and exaltation at having bidden farewell to "an officer, and a gentleman, who was going to court danger and death," this being her description of him to her sister-in-law afterwards.

"You live amongst queer characters, Olly," said Eddie as brother and sister drove to the station together. "By-the-bye my servant Giles lives in this part. He's coming out with me. He went home on leave yester-

day for three days. You wouldn't believe it, but I had eleven different men besieging my rooms the day they knew I was going out. They all declared they were excellent grooms and were wild to come. I wouldn't part with Giles for a good lot. He is a perfect treasure!"

"I know his mother well," said Olive. "It will be sad for her losing him, for he is her only son. Still I believe she will let him go willingly—I shall go to see her when he leaves."

They drove on in the dusky twilight. They did not talk much, but her last words to him were: "I have no fears for you now, Eddie;" and he replied quickly: "I am on active service, remember, I suppose I shall never be off it; but I've changed my commander since I saw you last."

She came back to the farm quiet and thoughtful.

"Olly," said Osmond after a time; "Eddie is different; his very face shows it."

"Yes," she said, turning to him with radiant eyes. "He has told me he is." Then with a little burst of enthusiasm she exclaimed:—"Oh Diogenes, why isn't there more real Christianity in the world! Why do people play at it so, when it is such a glorious possibility for all! And why do we feel so backward in recommending our Master, so ashamed of speaking to each other about Him!"

Osmond smiled quietly.

"You have been able at any rate to follow one example set you. 'He first findeth his own brother . . . and he brought him to Jesus!'"

## CHAPTER XVII

### IN THE ORCHARD

"Nature alone is antique, and the oldest art a mushroom."

—*Carlyle.*

"Nature is God's, art is man's instrument."

—*Sir T. Overbury.*

"I HAVE heard from Vinny, Diogenes. She is coming down next Tuesday to stay with us for a week, won't it be nice? But I am afraid I shall be at the Rectory most of the day. Still I shall see her in the evening."

"Is Mother Mumps coming with her?"

"Just for the day on her way into Hertfordshire. She is going to stay with some friends there."

"It will be rather awkward your being away."

"I think I shall bring Ida here for the afternoon. You see we shall only do lessons for an hour or so in the morning. As long as I have her with me, it will be all right. I am sure Mrs. Hunt will say so."

Olive and Osmond were at breakfast the next morning, and Olive had hardly finished speaking before there was a little clatter and bustle in the passage.

"Where's Uncle Humbug?"

It was Ida, of course, rushing breathlessly into the house with this inquiry, dragging Beautiful after her in only a scanty night attire.

"Here we are—at breakfast," called out Olive; "come along in."

"Mother's been saying such things," panted the child, looking with bewildered eyes first at Olive then at Osmond. "She says Miss Tracy is coming to be my governess. Why they're horrid people, and how can she leave you, Uncle Humbug?"

Olive drew the child gently to her.

"Darling let us forget all about the governess! I am coming to take you for walks, and tell you stories, and we will come over and have tea with Uncle Humbug. We won't do lessons all day, and I shall make some new frocks for Beautiful."

Ida looked down fondly at her treasure.

"I brought her along in her nighty; I hadn't time to put her frock on, because I was so frightened—mother said I mustn't run wild no longer. I don't run wild, I run fearfully straight always, and I've hardly stopped for breath. Will you make Beautiful a new sunbonnet? And what will Uncle Humbug do?"

"He will always be ready to hear what Miss Oddity has been doing, when Miss Tracy comes back to him in the evening," said Osmond, buttering a piece of toast and holding it out to her.

Ida took it and began munching it thoughtfully, then she rested her head confidingly against Olive's shoulder.

"You'll be just the same as you always are," she said; "you won't turn into a governess and slap me?"

"I promise you I won't do that."

"And you'll let me run out into the garden whenever I want to?"

"Look here, Diogenes, you have a talk with her; I want to send a letter into the village by Andrew, and he is just off."

Olive left the room, and Ida drew near to Osmond with a relieved face.

"Tell me true, Uncle Humbug. She isn't going to turn strict!"

"I don't think she will. She is very fond of you, little woman, and you love her too, don't you?"

"Yes, and so does Beautiful; and she wants new frocks dreadful!"

"Well, you know you are getting a big girl, and all the boys and girls in the village have been doing lessons for a long time. You must be wanting to do some, I am sure, so that you may grow up a clever girl, and not be looked upon as a stupid little ignoramus! Of course every little girl has a governess when they are big enough, and I think you would rather have Miss Tracy to teach you than a tall old lady in cap and spectacles, with a long face and pointed chin, and a pocket full of lesson books!"

Ida was laughing now. "Yes I would, and so would Beautiful, and Miss Tracy will have to teach her as well as me, she can learn a lot of lessons if she can't say them. Beautiful can't speak, that's the only thing she can't do besides not walking, but she does whisper in my ear very soft in the night sometimes, just to tell me she loves me!"

Here Beautiful was hugged and kissed; and when Olive came back to the room, a little later, she was hugged and kissed too.

"I will be good, I will learn my lessons with you, and I like you ever so much better than the governess with the pointed chin and lesson books in her pocket, and spectacles and cap!"



The little maiden had recovered her spirits, and startled her parents by observing at the lunch table —

“Beautiful and me has been wanting to be good and learn lessons ever since we was born, and nobody has showed us how to!”

Mrs. Hunt looked across at her husband.

“I hope you feel snubbed, William dear,” then she said cheerfully to her little daughter —

“I’m glad to hear of such a want, Ida. The way will be easy for you after next Monday.”

“Miss Tracy is going to make Beautiful new frocks,” the small maiden continued; “and we shall play games when we are too tired to do lessons!”

Mrs. Hunt wisely ignored this small note of defiance. She was relieved the matter had been amicably settled, and only bargained with Olive that she was never to refer to her in any difficulty.

“Your judgment and tact are superior to mine; and you must consider you have full authority over her. I have the utmost confidence in your capacity to manage her. I’m afraid I am not a person who can use middle measures with children. I either err on the side of severity or indulgence!”

So Olive started work with her small pupil on Monday, and found it gave her plenty of scope for thought, patience and ingenuity.

On Tuesday, true to her word, Vinny arrived with Elsie, and the former was welcomed heartily by the farmer and his wife.

It was a bright sunny day; wonderfully warm for the beginning of November. Olive came back in time for lunch, bringing her small pupil with her, and afterwards

they all adjourned to the orchard, where, with warm wraps round her, Vinny sat back in a low chair looking the picture of content.

This old orchard had not often been without occupants during the summer, and Olive and Osmond, like Vinny, felt a spell of restfulness and content fall upon them whenever they entered it. They had seen it in the early summer when the scent of the new mown hay was wafted across it, and it was full of golden sunshine and flowers; autumn with its mellow touches upon fruit and corn, had brightened its old fruit trees with rosy apples and golden pears; and now even in November the sun seemed loth to leave it, and the dying leaves still clung with tenacious grip to their parent stems.

"Isn't it an ideal place?" Vinny said presently. "I could live my life here with such happiness! I always look back with pleasure to my days last summer. It was a perfect haven!"

Elsie glanced round with a laughing shrug of her shoulders.

"A week would suffice for me," she said.

"How have you existed, Olive, all this summer?"

"Oh it suits me very well," answered Olive, looking at her younger sister critically.

Elsie was now dressed in the latest fashion, and had already begun to lighten her mourning with touches of white and heliotrope. She looked radiantly happy; her slow and rather dreamy manner had given way to a fresh sparkling audacity. She was conscious of her power to please and attract, and so was not troubled with any diffidence or awkwardness.

"I think I have proved my theory true," Elsie went on, as she in her turn criticised Olive :

"Circumstances make or mar. Olive and I have changed places. Travel and society have developed my capabilities. Stagnation and a narrow sphere have dwarfed hers. She has grown grave, quiet—perhaps sweet—just like her surroundings. I have quickened, become alive as she used to say 'to my finger tips !'"

"But I don't think I am staid and grave," said Olive, with a comical face of disgust.

Vinny laid her hand on hers.

"You are just right, dear, and still decidedly the best looking of the two. I make a point of continually telling Elsie so ; for her head is being turned."

"No," said Elsie calmly ; "as we are not together I am not jealous. I am passable, I know ; and looks are not everything. As a man said to me the other day, who sat out a long dinner opposite a professional beauty : 'You can get as much pleasure from a beauty painted on canvas as you do from a pretty woman when she doesn't know how to talk.' I suppose you are quite reconciled to this life, Olive ?"

"I think I am now. Frankly, I love the country and the country people, but not in such a passion of delight and content as Vinny. I want plenty of occupation. If I have that, time passes."

"I want no occupation," said Vinny serenely ; "except perhaps a book, when Nature ceases to smile. Do you know how I used to pass my days here ? I had breakfast at half-past eight, then did what necessary writing or business I had in hand ; and then I used to go round and round the old kitchen garden, picking and

eating what fruit I liked, watching the bees and birds and butterflies; pulling up a cabbage or lettuce for dinner; bringing it into the house; having a little gossip in the kitchen or farmyard; and then out again, this time into the flower garden, there to pick flowers and arrange them in my sitting-room and bedroom. Early dinner at one o'clock. Afterwards I would bring work or books into this dear old orchard, and here I would lie full length on the grass, taking stores of sweet fresh, wholesome air into my body, and delicious lessons from Nature into my soul. I hardly ever touched work or book. Tea would come too soon, but after it was over I would shake myself together and go for a good brisk walk for the good of my liver and digestion. Back again about nine o'clock, when I would have supper, go into the kitchen and have a gossip with Andrew, and then to bed. Now that is my ideal life! No dressmakers, or servants, or housekeeping to distract your mind; no entertaining or being entertained; no rush of engagements, or crowds or bustle. Everything to soothe and rest. And I would like that kind of life for ever and ever!"

"Now, Diogenes," said Elsie with twinkling eyes, "you always used to dose us with your wisdom; give Vinny a dose now—she needs it. Waste of life—talents rustling—selfish indolence—useless existence. Begin—I remember your style."

Osmond looked up, then spoke:

"There were two generals once on the eve of an important campaign. One started at daybreak to inspect his brigade. He was in his saddle all day; had galloped from point to point to take the enemy's bearings; he had consulted and interviewed every reliable informant in the

vicinity of the camp; and came at last at sunset to the other general.

"He found him in exactly the same position as he had left him in at daybreak that morning—in his tent, sitting at a small table, with his head in his hands. He expressed astonishment at his inertness, when he learned that it was in such a manner that he had spent his day.

"‘My good fellow,’ was the quick retort, ‘you have been working your body, but I my brain!’ And the story goes that the brain-working general achieved most success."

Vinny smiled.

"I shall say nothing after that, or I may harm my cause."

"Well," said Elsie quickly, "do you think I am a failure or success, Diogenes?"

"Tell me first which opinion you value most—your own or mine?"

"I suppose my own, for I am the best authority. I know myself better than you do."

"Then why ask me such a question?"

"Oh because I like my own opinion to be strengthened by another."

"I think your outer man is a success."

"Come, that is something! In fact that is all I want to know. No one has any business to criticise my inner being. And the inner forms the outer—so people say—so I am a success through and through."

Then she laughed merrily.

"We won't talk about ourselves any more. I am bound to assert my superiority to my old self of last spring, in order to convince Diogenes that my present

life is a satisfying one. He told me to let him know when it failed to be that. I am afraid that time will never come. Do you remember our talk about foundations? My house is being rapidly built."

"It is a fair weather house," said Osmond, looking at her somewhat sadly.

"Don't croak! I hope to have fair weather for many a year to come."

"What are you talking about?" asked Vinny with lazy interest.

But no one spoke, and then Elsie changed the subject. They were a happy party that afternoon, in spite of the graver topic of the war which kept creeping into their conversation. Ida flitted from one to the other, but was not in their way. She was a child of endless resources, and quite accustomed to play alone. After tea, Elsie took her departure. She was driven to the station by the farmer, who came back to his wife announcing:

"That young lady be a uncommon spirited one, but she be wonderful ignorant for her years. They Londoners be all the same. She didn't know a field o' mango wuzels from turnips, and axed me what 'A did wi' myself in the winter. 'You can't be cuttin' hay or gettin' in yer corn,' sez she, 'an' the fields be all empty!' 'A just axed her to come an' stop wi' us for a month in the winter, an' 'A'd calkilate 'A could keep her active, but she laughs, an' sez she, 'A was kept asleep till last spring, and now 'A've wakened up, 'A shan't be in heste to go to sleep again,' sez she. 'A couldn't make much out o' her, but she be wonderful ignorant!'"

Olive took Ida home soon after Elsie had left, and

then Vinny came and sat by the sitting-room window, whilst Osmond lay on his couch.

They were silent at first; Vinny's sweet face looked rather sad, as it always did when in repose. She turned round presently to Osmond and asked suddenly: "What did you mean by your story? Do you think I am working my brain and planning great things when I idle here?"

"I think," said Osmond slowly, "that a silent time with God and Nature often feeds our souls. You have so little time for meditation, you say, in town. To give time to one's inner life is never wasted."

"Ah!" said Vinny, with a long drawn sigh, "don't credit me with high aspirations. The time for those has gone with me. I only seek present ease and present comfort. I am tired of everybody and everything, and want a rest. Now let us talk of other things. When I first suggested your coming here, I little thought that Olive would settle down for good and all. That affair of Duke Crofton's electrified me! Has Colonel Holmes come on the *tapis* at all?"

"Yes, but I am not going to betray Olive's confidence. You must talk to her."

"She looks wonderfully happy," Vinny went on in a musing tone. "I thought that she had made a mistake in refusing Duke, in fact I made sure when he came home again they would make it up. By-the-bye, who do you think I saw at Paddington Station the other day? Mark Crofton!"

"But he is in Australia."

"He is not there now. He was on the platform talking very eagerly to a good-looking girl. Rather a

striking-looking woman she was, with very fair hair, and very dark eyes. She looked unhappy, but they seemed on most intimate terms. He did not see me, and I did not want to make myself known to him. But I am sorry that he is home again. It will only be another trouble to his poor old father. How is he?"

"Fairly well, I believe. Mrs. Crofton manages him and the whole household now. I have never seen her myself, but your description of the girl Mark was with rather tallies with Olive's description of her. I had no idea he was home. It must be quite a sudden move on his part."

"And not a good one I am sure, from what we know of Mark."

Twilight came on; outside the owls commenced to hoot, and then Vinny said she would like to walk down the road to meet Olive on her way back from the Rectory. She left the room, and Osmond lay and mused.

"Vinny is the one whose need is greatest," he said half-aloud. "The world has failed to satisfy her. Elsie will have to buy her experience yet!"



## CHAPTER XVIII

### "SEVERELY WOUNDED"

In secret I wept for the dangers of battle,  
And thy glory itself was scarce comfort to me.—*Scott.*

"IT does one good to look at Mrs. Stanton," said Mrs. March one afternoon, as tea was going on in the farmhouse kitchen. "She do seem made for the country and the country for her. There isn't a veg'tubble or flower in the garden, that she doesn't watch and hang over like a hen with her chicks. Now our Miss is a happy young lady too; but she ain't so wrapped up in flowers; she likes 'em but her thoughts ain't in 'em like Mrs. Stanton's is!"

"It's like this," broke in Miss March quickly. "I can understand Mrs. Stanton's feelin's, havin' been a Londoner like herself. Her life is where she can't get such things. I mind how hard I struggled to get mignonette to grow in a window-box I had, and it never seemed to have its proper country smell when it did come up. Now Mrs. Stanton, she comes down here for a holiday, and 'tis all fresh to her, she knows she has but a bit of time with us, and she makes the most of it. Town folks loves a visit to the country, but then she wouldn't like to live here all the year round, and Miss Tracy is going to, that's all the difference."

"Ay, Bess," said the farmer, with a twinkle in his eye; "you be mighty clever, but Mrs. Stanton sez to

me yester afternoon sez she, with that purty soft laugh of hers, 'Andrew, I could spend my life happy here,' sez she. 'You bain't in want of a garden woman are you?' sez she. 'Wall,' sez 'A, 'you'm be right welcome to come and try your luck wi' us,' sez 'A, 'but there's your gentleman to be considered!' 'Ah' sez she looking sad like, 'tis only the old maids have their liberty. 'A try to forget 'A'm a wife down here,' sez she. 'An' 'A sez to her 'twas a shame to shut her up in that there artful city where singin' birds is only heard in cages, an' the heavens rain smuts upon yer! But she can't help herself, poor crittur. Her heart an' leanin's is right, but her sitivation is all wrong!'"

And if Vinny had heard this last sentiment, she would have echoed it with fervour.

She spent all her time out of doors, and only came in when darkness set in.

Osmond enjoyed talking to her, for she had much to tell him of their summer travels; and she had enjoyed her sight-seeing so much more from having had Elsie with her.

"It has done her a lot of good," said Vinny one evening, when Olive was talking about her younger sister. "And her fresh intelligent interest in everything is delightful. Elsie has an artist's soul; architecture, paintings, sculpture and antiquities, all have a charm in her eyes. She would never have been satisfied in the Garden of Eden. Now I should, that is the difference between us."

"You don't care for man's productions?" said Osmond.

"I only care for them if they take me back to the

original, and that they seldom do. I love everything in God's creation, but I can stamp the beauties of nature upon the retina of my mind without any aid from canvas or sculpture. A beautiful face, a beautiful landscape, satisfies and contents my soul. Can you ever get the lights and shadows of the sky truthfully and realistically represented? I have never felt a thrill pass over me as I look at the most beautiful paintings on record, but I have thrilled through and through looking at a sunset sky; moonlight upon the water; the afterglow on some of the snowy Alps."

Vinny spoke slowly and dreamily. Olive looked at her, and gave a comical shake of her head.

"You are too visionary," she said. "I think you ought to have been a cloistered nun, but then you would have got so little pleasure out of their chapels and music."

Vinny smiled. "You know I am not a true music lover. The human voice touches me; little else. I would rather listen to a blackbird than to Paderewski, or any other noted musician in the world! Eden's music for me, not the London concert halls! 'Barbaric' in my tastes, some one called me once—perhaps I am."

"Music influences people very differently," said Olive. "You have no idea of the entertainment it gives to my small pupil. I don't think she has a note of music in her composition, and I expect to have tremendous struggles over it by-and-by. I found her strumming on the piano to-day. 'Listen!' she said; 'why do they make a piano so funnily? This is the big bear down at the bottom, rumble, rumble! the middle bear in the middle, tum, tum, tum! and the little bear at

the top, tinkle, tinkle ! It's father bass and baby treble, and what's the middle of the piano called ?' I couldn't tell her. She takes my breath away sometimes. 'It must have a name,' she went on, 'because it's the mother, just like us three, father, mother and me.' Now when I start her at her five-fingered exercises, she keeps to her invention, and murmurs under her breath : 'It's always the mother who does the exercises, I wish you would let the father and the baby do them.'"

"She's a clever little creature," said Vinny, with a wistful smile. "I expect she will give her parents a lot of trouble when she grows older, but I envy them !"

"She keeps me busy," said Olive quickly ; "and for that I thank her."

A few mornings after, Olive, looking through the paper, as was her wont before breakfast, came across the tidings that she had dreaded to see, namely, that Captain Marmaduke Crofton was severely wounded.

She let the paper drop from her hand, and Vinny coming into the room found her gazing vacantly out of the window, as white as a sheet.

"Why ! what is the matter ?"

Then with a quick glance at the paper —

"Any bad news ?"

Olive turned with great self-control to make the tea.

"Duke is severely wounded," she said.

Vinny seized the paper at once.

"Where ? In Ladysmith ?"

"Yes. In repulsing an attack of the Boers."

"I see it. Here is his Battery mentioned—a 'brilliant bit of work in which Captain Crofton specially distinguished himself.' Well, it is not 'dangerously'

wounded, 'severely' is bad, but it might be worse. Poor Duke! I am sorry. I hoped he would be safe in Ladysmith; and I am afraid there will not be much chance of news. I see this is several days late. His poor old father, and his wife! How dreadful for them!"

"I don't expect Sir Marmaduke will be told," said Olive quietly. She added, after a moment's pause: "I should like to go over to the Court and find out if they have heard any particulars, but Mrs. Crofton is so peculiar that I never feel sure of her welcome."

"Oh nonsense, it is the natural thing for old friends to inquire. I will come with you. I am longing to see this redoubtable young woman. We will go this afternoon."

"And what about Ida?"

"That child is a perfect incubus to you! Bring her over here. She will be quite happy with Diogenes, and is a great amusement to him."

"I hope Mrs. Hunt will approve. I don't like to shirk my duties."

But in the end the arrangement was carried out, and Vinny and Olive went over to Crofton Court. They found Cora at home. She received Vinny with grace and dignity, and Olive with more geniality than usual. She was very calm about Duke's wound.

"Yes," she said, "it was a great shock. I have written to the War Office and begged them to let me know further particulars; but I expect they do not know more at present. I have not told Sir Marmaduke. It will only make him anxious."

"There is generally the comfort," said Vinny, "that if they are badly wounded they will be invalided home;

but Duke will have to stay where he is. Still for the present he is out of further danger."

Cora started, and an alarmed look for an instant came into her eyes.

"I never thought he might be sent home!" she exclaimed. Then meeting Olive's indignant look, she added hastily: "Of course if he is very ill, I—I should go to him."

"You could hardly do that under the circumstances. If he were not in a besieged town you might. Would you prefer that, to having him invalided home and nursing him here?" said Vinny.

"Yes," she replied; "I am not in love with this place. All my friends are out there, and I am anxious about them. My old home has had to be shut up and left. I had a letter from one of my sisters yesterday. They have all gone to Cape Town, but I have a good many other friends who are in the Transvaal. After the colonies, English country life seems so tame and dull. And as for society, I hardly see any one here from one week's end to another. Of course I do not go out much. I do not wish it, but one does like to have people dropping in in a friendly and informal manner."

"But you must have a good many callers?"

"Yes," she said a little bitterly, "they have done the correct thing. They have called and I have returned their call, and there the intimacy rests."

"Have you no relatives in England," said Vinny kindly, "who would come to stay with you till Captain Crofton returns? They would enliven your loneliness."

"None that would care to come. Oh I am not complaining. I have plenty of resources."

"By-the-bye," Vinny said, "I was so surprised to see Mark was in England again! Has he come down to see Sir Marmaduke yet? It was rather strange, but I saw you at Paddington with him the other day, and yet had not the slightest idea then who you were!"

Again Cora's face showed agitation, she turned to stir the fire with a little laugh.

"You must have been quite mistaken; Mark went to Australia."

There was dead silence. Vinny looked across at Olive expressively, then she said carelessly:

"I suppose I must have been mistaken then; but it was Mark's double. I knew he had gone to Australia, but thought he might have returned home. He always was very erratic, I remember, and had a way of turning up when you least expected him."

Cora said nothing; Olive now asked if she might see Sir Marmaduke, and, after a little hesitation, she led the way. As Vinny remained in the drawing-room, Cora very unwillingly left Olive with the old man, and returned to do her duty as hostess.

Vinny did not touch on dangerous ground again. She could always adapt herself to her hearer, and conversation flowed easily and freely. She discovered more of Cora's tastes and opinions in one visit, than Olive had in the whole summer; and there was much that she liked in the young wife.

Olive meanwhile had been treated to a little burst of confidence from old Sir Marmaduke.

"I want Duke home," was his cry. "Things are going wrong, and I can't look after them. This Mordaunt is worse than the last agent. He is as much too go-

ahead as the other was too slow. I am for ever drawing cheques for repairs and improvements which he considers necessary. It is all I am good for, my dear! A crippled, disabled, old man just able to write his own name! but I will do that till Duke comes home, and then he must leave the service and settle down here with his wife. That is if ever he comes home alive! My poor boy! Shut up in Ladysmith to starve, and no chance of being relieved at present! How am I to know whether he is dead or alive! No letter, no news, and here am I too ill to attend to business matters, and Mordaunt has it all his own way! Would you believe it, he won't come and see me! He is afraid I shall give him a bit of my mind; he makes one excuse after the other. I have never set eyes on him yet, but I tell Cora if he doesn't obey my summons I will send him off. I am not quite a fool, though she thinks I am, but it will be all right when Duke is home."

Then he began to talk about his wife, and to divert his mind. Olive interested him in her quaint little pupil and her surroundings. When he was quite cheerful again she left him and rejoined Vinny in the drawing-room.

"Well, how do you like her?" Olive asked her sister, as they were making their way homewards.

"I am puzzled," was Vinny's quiet reply. "She is not a stupid woman by any means. She is very fond of animals, and is a good horsewoman. Yet she says she has hardly taken half a dozen rides. Sir Marmaduke has no good enough mount for her. I pity her. It is a difficult and a solitary life that she is leading, and I admire her for the grit that enabled her to take and maintain such a position."



"She is not true," said Olive slowly.

"No; but I think there is something preying on her mind; some secret that she is afraid we will discover. What was her object in denying that she was with Mark? She might have known I could not be mistaken. I suppose he does not want his whereabouts to be discovered; perhaps he is in hiding. He may have got into some other scrape."

"I cannot feel warmly towards a woman who lies!" exclaimed Olive hotly.

"My dear child, I have seen too much of society subterfuges and polite equivocations to be so merciless in my judgment. I don't think I would tell a direct lie; but I am perfectly certain that I have been guilty again and again of fictitious compliments and excuses."

"Oh, Vinny, don't make yourself out untrue. I have such a scorn for anything underhand. I cannot bear to hear you talk of your life in town sometimes; you hardly seem to believe in anything."

"I think I feel more tenderly towards erring ones than you do," returned Vinny good-humouredly. "But then I don't profess to be a good person."

"Do I?" asked Olive. "I do so dislike to be thought a prig. But at the bottom of my heart I have the longing to be 'good,' as you call it."

Vinny laid her hand affectionately on her arm.

"I wish I were like you, Olive," she said. "I have quick eyes, and you are different to what you used to be. Not quite so rattled, but a good deal happier, I should say."

"It is happiness that I can hardly talk about," said Olive; "it is too deep to be ruffled, I hope."

There was a little silence. They were in the train, and Vinny gazed out upon the richly-tinted woods and hills through which they were passing with misty eyes.

Then she turned suddenly to her younger sister.

"I tried to be good once," she said. "It was soon after I married. I used to attend a church in Kensington, where there was a certain Father S—— that obtained an extraordinary influence over me for the time. I went to early services, and read books of devotion, and copied out copious extracts from a book about the Holy Fathers, which he lent me, and I had longings after a devotional life. Looking back now I think perhaps I was rather a trying young wife. It was the beginning of Randolph's life and mine drifting apart. And we have never properly come together since. I think we perhaps prefer to go our own ways now ; but I was too young a wife to begin it. I tried it for about six months, but it was too great an effort. Father S—— moved away, and my prop was gone. So I came to the conclusion it was all much ado about nothing, and I have not dipped deeply into religious matters since."

"You have never told me this before," said Olive.

"No ; it isn't a subject I care to bring up. Religion has failed to satisfy me."

"Diogenes would say you had been building on sand, and so of course your building came to the ground. I'm glad I wasn't led your way," said Olive musingly.

"What way were you led ?"

It was Olive's opportunity. Very slowly and haltingly she gave her sister her experience. She finished by saying :

"It is the daily presence of Christ with one ; that is

the secret of it all. I have never forgotten some words that Duke said before going away. He defined a happy life like this: 'When the inner life is adjusted so satisfactorily that it gives one no trouble, and there is time and opportunity to spend the outer one on others.' I found I couldn't adjust my inner life at all to my satisfaction, so I handed it over to the One who could."

"I dare say," said Vinny slowly, "that I made Father S—— my god. I know I went to him for everything. Still it seems too late now for me to get up any enthusiasm about anything."

She turned the subject and would say no more, but a few days after, when she and Osmond had been spending an idle afternoon in the orchard, and the tea bell rang to summon them indoors, she rose from her lounge chair with a sigh.

"I am doing a lot of thinking down here, Diogenes. I believe if I were in the country long I should turn into quite a good person. My soul seems to come uppermost. I suppose it is the combination of circumstances."

## CHAPTER XIX

### A FULLER SPHERE

Who does the best his circumstance allows  
Does well, acts nobly ; angels could no more.

— *Young.*

THOSE were trying days to Olive. Fighting against it as she did, Duke, and Duke only, was in her thoughts and heart. She opened the morning paper with a trembling hand, fearing to see his name on the death-roll. She lay awake at night picturing him suffering in a rough, bare hospital with no luxuries or comforts, and a very limited supply of nourishment. She wondered if he were maimed for life ; if he were making progress ; or if his vigour and strength were slowly ebbing away.

And Osmond was quite as anxious ; to all appearances more so than Olive, who was strangely quiet as she went about her different duties. Vinny had asked Cora to let them know when she received any news, but days passed, and they heard no more. At last, one morning, a letter from Cora came. It was very brief.

DEAR MRS. STANTON,

I have heard that Marmaduke has been wounded in his head and right shoulder. He is making good progress, so we are very thankful.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

CORA CROFTON.

Olive went off to the Rectory that morning rather restless and pre-occupied ; and Ida quickly took advan-

tage of her mood. It was not all plain sailing with such a wayward, excitable, little pupil; and there were times when Olive's patience nearly gave way, and her self-control failed her. Ida's idea of lessons was to dash through them as quickly as possible, and then scamper off out of doors. If all went well, she was in the best of tempers, but a turned lesson brought a thundercloud to her brow.

"There!" she said, after a long struggle with a sum which had been handed back to her to do again. "Now you're as cross as a proper governess, and I won't do any more of those nasty figures! I hate them, and I hate you!"

She dashed her slate on the floor, breaking it to pieces, and seizing Beautiful by her arm, swept out of the room like a small whirlwind.

Olive sat for a moment astonished, and taken aback by this display of temper; then, with a sigh, went in search of her. After a fruitless wandering over house and garden, she met Mrs. Hunt starting out on a tour through the village. She smiled when she heard of what had occurred.

"Don't look so shamefaced about it, my dear. I knew you wouldn't always sail along so smoothly. You know most of her hiding places, so it will only be a question of time. I can't offer to help you, because I am too busy, and I warned you that you must manage her entirely by yourself. I am worried too this morning. My husband caught such a cold a few Sundays ago in church, and he has got worse and worse, and won't stay in bed, and this morning his breathing is quite alarming. It is all that obstinate old Ward's fault; he would not

light the stoves early enough. Said he had been here through three 'generations'—as he calls it—of parsons, and the church stoves were never lighted before the first of November. I am going down to give him a good scolding now, and I have sent for Dr. Graves. Perhaps my husband will attend to him, if not to me; you see I have my authority defied, as well as you!"

She passed on, and Olive pursued her search with fresh vigour. Presently she thought of the church, and making her way through the old churchyard, looked in at the half-open door. To her great relief, she found her search was at an end; but she was a witness of a strange scene. At the chancel rails stood Ida, facing the stained east window, and her small figure looked almost defiant in its attitude.

She was talking out loud, and whether it was meant to be a prayer, or only the utterance of her thoughts Olive never knew, but this was what she said:

"Oh God, it is no use telling me to be good, for I *won't* be good. I don't want to be, and I never will be again. I've shaken Beautiful till her teeth has rattled down her throat, and I've throwed her into the stinging nettles! And—and I'm not a *bit* sorry!"

A little sob seemed to rise in the child's throat; but she turned round and marched down the aisle, and Olive, realising she was in a dangerous mood, slipped behind a pillar, and let her pass out without stopping her. Then, at a little distance, she followed her. Ida walked on with a discontented air, kicking the pebbles that came in her way. She paused when, just outside the church gate, she came to the patch of stinging nettles. A bit of Beautiful's cotton frock was to be seen.

Beautiful's little mother began to feel remorse tugging at her heart.

"Are you there, Beautiful?"

A silence, only broken by the twittering of some blue tits close by.

"Beautiful, did I hurt you much?"

"Beautiful, dear, I'm sorry, but I can't pick you up, the nettles hurt so!"

A long pause, and then the love for her cherished plaything overcame all else.

"My darling Beautiful, come back to your dear, sweet mother!"

The little hands plunged into the nettles; Beautiful was rescued, apparently no worse for her treatment, and then, sitting down on the gravel path, the little maiden rocked her doll to and fro in her arms, tears flowing freely from pain, regret and general distress.

It was at this point Olive stepped forward, and, without a word, she lifted child and doll in her arms, and carried them into the schoolroom.

Then she rubbed the little blistered fingers with dock leaves, and kissed and comforted her small pupil, whose naughty fits were quickly over; and whose little tender heart was now burdened with the sense of her shortcomings.

Clasping Olive tightly round the neck she sobbed as if her heart would break:

"I've spoken improper to God, and I did the very wickedest thing of all, I spoke it in church out loud when He was listening! And He'll never, never forgive me. I know He never will!"

It was not difficult to ease and comfort the troubled

little heart, and Ida was soon kneeling at Olive's knee whispering out her sorrow and penitence to the One she had grieved.

If Olive had followed her own feelings, she would not have touched lessons again that day, but she was wise enough to be firm, and when Ida was composed and calm, a fresh slate was brought out; the same sum written down and handed to her.

"Now, dear, you must prove that you are sorry, and set to work at once."

For just an instant a rebellious curve came to the child's lips, and then, with hanging head, in perfect silence, she accomplished the task; and both teacher and pupil drew a breath of relief when the slate was put aside and more congenial occupations were taken up.

Olive was tired in spirit and body when she walked home that evening. She wondered sometimes if she had been wise in undertaking a child's education and training; whether she were fitted for it by nature, and though she had been trying it for such a short time, she began to feel that it was a cramped and narrow sphere to live in.

"I ought to be content," she mused, as she walked along. "Diogenes is content with a still smaller sphere than mine. If Ida were bigger, and we had more time at lessons it would not seem such a waste of the day, but then perhaps I should find myself not competent to teach her. If I do spend my afternoons in dressing dolls and playing games, I keep her out of mischief, and get many chances of improving the occasion. It is the being 'faithful in the little things' that must be my endeavour. I must hope that greater things will come to me!"



Her thoughts took an upward turn, and it was in her daily walks to and from the Rectory that she learnt the secret of communion with her Master.

Then suddenly came changes.

Vinny was summoned home to her husband, and on the very day that she left, Mr. Hunt lay dangerously ill of pneumonia. Mrs. Hunt rose to the occasion. She left her parish and nursed her husband with patient, untiring devotion. Olive offered at once to sleep at the Rectory, and Mrs. Hunt gladly accepted her offer, for there was much that she could do towards helping in the house. After three weeks of anxious nursing Mr. Hunt recovered, but was in such a delicate state of health, that the doctor said the only chance of saving his life would be to take him abroad for the whole winter. In an incredibly short time Mrs. Hunt had made her arrangements. A *locum tenens* had been obtained who would come over for the services on Sunday. The house was to be left in charge of a caretaker, and Olive was to give Ida a home at the farm till her parents returned. This seemed to settle the matter of her remaining in the neighbourhood. She was glad it had been taken out of her hands, for she felt that she could not fail Mrs. Hunt at such a time.

"I am thankful for my mercies," Mrs. Hunt said to her the day before she left the Rectory with her invalid husband. "I little thought when I first heard of your arrival at the farm what a comfort you would be to me. I am going away with a light heart, for you will give an eye to the parish, and keep things going, won't you? You know most of the villagers, and they know and like you. You will superintend the Sunday school, and at-

tend the choir practices, and keep on the mothers' meeting and clubs, and write to me about it all, and then you have my child to look after and teach in addition. Oh, my dear Olive, I wonder if it is too much for you?"

Olive looked up at her friend with glowing eyes.

"It is in answer to prayer, Mrs. Hunt. I thrive in a full life; it is what I have been longing for! I have told you of my old life at home, the many for whom I had to think and arrange. It has been my great trial here that I have had too much time on my hands. I cannot tell you how gladly I shall set to work; and promise you I will do my very best, though, of course, I cannot expect to fill your place."

"You are going to become the busy worker, I the idler," said Mrs. Hunt with a little grimace of disgust.

"I am afraid a *dolce far niente* life will be very distasteful to you," said Olive.

"Don't mention it! I shudder sometimes at the thought, and yet when I look at my husband, and feel how nearly he has been taken from me, I am furious with myself for feeling a pang at going with him! He wants me now more than the parish, and a woman's mission in life is to supply the wants of her fellow creatures. As long as he needs me I shall be happy. When he is well enough to say to me, as he has so often done: 'my dear, I wish to be left undisturbed,' I shall have hankerings after my dear parish again!"

Ida wandered about disconsolately at this time. Her mother thought lightly of her feelings.

"Children are so easily made happy. They adapt themselves so naturally to change of life and scene," she said to her husband, when he was wondering how

the little girl would bear it. And to all appearance, Ida took it calmly and unconcernedly, chattering of the new arrangements with the greatest animation and interest. But when the last day came, and she was put to bed for the last time in her old nursery, the full realisation of her coming loss swept across her little soul.

"Delia," she said to her maid, "do you think mother might just like to look in at me before she goes to bed? Just in case you know I have anything to tell her. Because she's going away so early to-morrow morning!"

Delia took the hint, and Mrs. Hunt was informed that her little daughter would like to see her.

She came in with luggage labels, and straps in her hand.

"Well, Ida," she said cheerfully, "what is it, dear? I am very busy. There seems so much to be got through. Do you want anything?"

There was no answer for a minute; then, in a very small voice:

"If Miss Tracy has to go away too, what shall I do, mother?"

"You absurd child! Is she likely to leave you? Be a good girl and do all that you are told. You will be very happy at the farm. Now good-night; I must hurry away, for father may be wanting me."

She bent down and hastily kissed the fair, curly head that was now turned away from her towards the wall. Then she went out, closing the door sharply after her. She little knew how near she had been to a burst of affection and love from her child's overcharged heart. She had never been a demonstrative mother, and yet had sometimes longed for some token of affection from her

small daughter. This token was so nearly given to her that night, and yet—she just missed it.

Ida's head was turned away; for tears were falling fast, and she clutched hold of Beautiful with hot trembling hands.

"No one don't want me, Beautiful, except you; they're going across the sea and I shall belong to no one, and I did want to hug mother tight just for once—only once, and I would never do it again! She was too quick and hurrying, and she's banged the door, and oh, I do want some one to kiss me tight!"

She sobbed herself to sleep, but later on father and mother both stood by her bedside.

"My poor little girlie," said Mr. Hunt wistfully. "How we shall miss your restless, happy little ways!"

"She will be well looked after," said his practical wife, stooping over her little daughter and covering one arm and shoulder, which were exposed. "She is easily pleased, and children have no very strong affections. Why, her cheeks are quite tear-stained; she must have been crying in her sleep! Over some imaginary woe befalling her cherished doll, I expect! I think it is the doll that occupies a first place in her heart; we come second. Now, William, come; you will see her again to-morrow morning; it is not good-bye."

They left the room, and the child slept unconsciously on, to wake the next morning with a looming shadow over her. She was very quiet at the early breakfast, and followed her father about afterwards from room to room. Olive came over and received a great many parting instructions, and then the time came for the actual departure. An embrace from each parent, and then Ida

ran along the drive after the carriage, waving her handkerchief. She came back to Olive with a sad little face, but was given so many things to do that the sunbeams came back, and she trotted round the house making herself generally useful, full of eager anticipation of her stay at the Farm.

Olive did indeed find her hands full now, but she "gloried in it," as Osmond often told her. -It gave her less time for thinking; and in looking after the wants of the villagers, she found comfort and help herself. Sometimes the constant presence of a child in the house was a trial to her, especially now the days were so short and dark, and Ida was necessarily kept indoors a good deal. It was difficult to keep her at all times happily employed, but Osmond was indefatigable in his plans of occupying her time, and Ida was wonderfully subservient to his will.

The Marches were fond of children, and in after years Ida used to look back to that winter of hers at the farmhouse as one of the happiest times in her life. She went out to the dairy and helped Miss March skim the milk, and roll her beautiful yellow butter into pats for the market. She would stand and watch Mrs. March making pastry and hot cakes, and with the parings that were over would knead delicious little cakes for herself and Beautiful. She would coax Andrew to let her drive some of the big cart horses round the yard, and would play hide-and-seek in the lofts and barns with some of the younger farm hands. But perhaps the time she liked best of all was in the twilight, when, lying on the rug by the sitting-room fire, she would listen to some wonderful stories told by Osmond.

"Oh," she exclaimed one day, "there can't be another person in the world like you, Uncle Humbug! I wish other boys and girls could hear your stories. When I grow up I shall have big parties, and ask every boy and girl I know to come and listen to you."

"You won't care for my stories then," said Osmond.

"I shall care for stories for ever, and ever, and ever!" was the solemn reply.

## CHAPTER XX

### NURSING

Solitude sometimes is best society,  
And short retirement urges sweet return.—*Milton.*

CHRISTMAS came and went very quietly at the Farm. The disastrous events in South Africa throughout the darkest months in the year, cast a gloom not only over the British nation as a whole, but over every family and individual. Even Andrew March was roused at last to take a little interest in the hundreds of his brave fellow countrymen who were fighting and falling so gallantly before their foe. He no longer ridiculed his sister for her interest in the newspapers, but would inquire daily,

“Well, Bess, hasn’t us thrashed them old Boers yet? My word! What is our army a-doin’? If they’d throw down their guns and kick them-there shells and cannon out o’ the way, and just use their fistises a bit, the enemy would be soon knocked to pieces! ’A’d like to see the foreigner who would stand up agen me!”

Mrs. Giles was still the one object of the villagers’ interest. When her son had come home to take leave of her he was treated as a hero, and if he had not been a steady, quiet lad, his head would have been turned by the adulation and praise that he received from those who formerly spoke of him in pitying contempt. If he had been going out as General in supreme command with the whole army under him, he could not have been treated with more respect and veneration.

"Ay, lad," said the landlord of the Spider, the principal inn in the village, "ye'll remember ye've the honour of Egerton Cross to keep up. There's Bill Tucker and Harry Davis been hurryin' themselves into a regiment to get out, and now finds theirselves in a reg'lar take in, having to go off to some barracks in Aldershot, and twiddle their thumbs a-doin' nothin' but drill, and is told as they be under age, and no recruits is a-goin' out to fight! Well the army has lost two strong, able chaps as ever I see, and small wonder if the enemy does get the better of us, if the young uns be all left at home. Us will have our eyes on 'ee, Giles, and will look out for yer name in the paper wi' an account o' yer fightin'! Mind 'ee gets that Victory Cross, they tell on, and just giv' the enemy a right good thrashin', and let us hear on victory right away, from the moment ye sets your foot on the enemy's ground!"

Mrs. Giles found some of the neighbours' questions rather embarrassing.

"No letter yet, Missis? And he's gone nigh on four weeks! Ay, ye've had a bit of a letter to tell on his doin's in the ship, but us want to know about his battles wi' the enemy, and he ought to be at 'em by this time! There be no word on him in the papers. 'Tis rayther disappointin'."

Olive's anxiety increased rather than lessened now that Eddie was at the Front. He had joined General Buller immediately on his arrival, and was through the whole of the Battle of Colenso on the Tugela. He sent her a telegram immediately after it, and with his usual thoughtfulness for his servant's mother included him in it.

"Giles and myself safe."



This caused great excitement in the village; Mrs. Giles wept tears of joy when she received it, and came up to the Farm to thank Olive for having sent it to her so promptly.

There was little news of Duke. All that could be heard was that he was going on well, and in the beginning of January a very short letter was received by his father. Poor Sir Marmaduke could not be kept long in ignorance of his son's fate, and he fretted sorely through those December days. Olive saw the letter when she went over to the Court one day. It was as follows:

Ladysmith, 8th Dec.

MY DEAR FATHER,

I know you will be glad to hear that I am getting along first rate. If I had not had so much fever following my wounds, I should have been up and about before this. We are holding out well here, so you must not be anxious. We are not idle here as perhaps you may know. Some of our fellows have just got in after a very successful little sortie in which they have ousted the Boers from Lombard's Kop and destroyed "Long Tom"! Only one man killed and three wounded on our side. Keep up heart. Buller is on the way to relieve us, and we have great faith in him. Let all friends know I'm convalescent. Tell Cora she must cheer you up.

Your affectionate son,

MARMADUKE.

P.S.—This is an experiment. A runner is trying to get through with several messages, and I daren't write more.

Sir Marmaduke was easier in his mind after receiving this, and Olive returned to the Farm cheering Osmond with the news.

One afternoon soon after this, Olive came in from some visits in the village. Osmond was in his room. It had been one of his suffering days, and his head was so bad, that he had retired to bed. Ida was on the rug

in the firelight, busy with her doll. She looked up as Olive entered the room, and her little voice sounded rather plaintive :

"Me and Beautiful has hurt throats, and we're going to wear flannel round them."

"But darling, you are not cutting up that nice little blanket I made for Beautiful?"

"Yes I am. Beautiful is crying 'cause her throat is very hurt, and she's going to bed at once!"

The little hands were busy winding strips of flannel round and round her treasure's neck till her face was almost hidden from sight.

Olive sat down by the fire, and warmed her feet, smiling at the child's play.

Presently Beautiful was put in her cradle with a little shake.

"You're feeling nasty and cross, and you're not to be, for you shall have the doctor to-morrow!"

Then the child flung herself on Olive's lap.

"Now you must bind me round, and make me well!"

Olive kissed her, then bent over her suddenly, for the blue eyes were heavy, the little hands hot and feverish.

"Is your throat really sore, Ida?"

"Of course it is. Wrap it up direck'ly. Beautiful and me is ill."

She spoke fretfully, and Olive took her straight up-stairs to bed, giving her a treacle posset, Mrs. March's favourite cure for a cold.

All night long she was feverish and restless, and the next morning seemed so poorly, that Olive sent for the doctor.

"I am very anxious," she said to Mrs. March; "for

six of the village children are down with scarlet fever. I don't know what I should do if the child has it."

"Deary me! 'twill be a bad job! Has the little Miss been playin' with any of them?"

"No, I never let her. But you know what a child she is! She passed little Bessie Cooper, who was sitting crying on the door step, and she held out her doll for her to kiss. 'There,' she said, 'Beautiful wants to comfort you, because she never likes to see chillen crying.' Little Bessie dried her tears but smothered her doll with caresses, and her mother says she was sickening for the fever then. She is very bad with it now. I only heard it this afternoon."

The doctor came, and there was soon no doubt that Ida had caught the fever. Olive at once moved with her into a top attic away from the rest of the house, and established herself there as nurse.

Fortunately the child had it lightly, but she was a restless excitable little patient, and her one cry was for Beautiful. She cried because the doctor would not feel her pulse one morning. "Beautiful is very ill; quite so bad as me, and he's a nasty man!" Olive humoured her as much as possible, but it was an anxious wearing time. The Marches were very good about it, and took the whole matter in a cheerful spirit, which was a great relief to Olive who felt the difficulties attending such an infectious illness. The days seemed to pass slowly, and though the sick child engrossed much of her time and thoughts, there were many hours of tedious watching when Olive longed for the companionship of Osmond. She did not go near him, and only escaped into the garden for a breath of air at rare intervals. But news-

papers and letters she received with pleasure, and she sent a daily account of the little patient to her parents abroad. Of course her thoughts were much in South Africa. Colonel Holmes at last obtained his wish and took his regiment off to the Front. It was in the sick room that Olive heard of the fierce attack on Ladysmith by the Boers, and of the desperate fighting on Waggon Hill, also of General Buller's second attempt to relieve that besieged town, and of the terrible losses at Spion Kop. Eddie was again in the thick of it, but escaped without a scratch, and his telegram assuring his family of his safety was received with thankfulness by Olive. Muriel wrote her long chatty letters, and by the end of January, Ida had left her bed, and was considered convalescent, so that Olive began to breathe more freely. She felt the responsibility of her charge more than she would allow, and the strain had been great for a time.

"Do birds catch scarlet fever?"

It was Ida who spoke, and she was sitting up in a big chair at the sunny attic window. Her little face looked white and thin, her thick curls were shorn to half their former length, and Beautiful alone seemed to have passed through the fever unchanged by its ravages. She lay on her mistress's lap as limp and imperturbable as ever.

It was the first week of convalescence. Olive was on her knees by the fire toasting some bread. She now came across with a tempting little tray of chicken broth. Ida glanced at it rather disdainfully. She was inclined to be fractious.

"I don't like that," she said.

"Oh, yes, you will if you taste it. I don't think birds catch scarlet fever. Why?"

"Because a little robin has been looking at me through the glass. I told him he hadn't better come so close. Who nurses robins when they're ill?"

"If you drink your broth, I will tell you a story of a little robin who was nursed by Dr. Rook."

The story and the broth were being received with great content when there was a knock at the door, and some letters were pushed underneath. Olive took hers, one of which was from Eddie. She had not heard of him for some time, and she was eager to hear his news. But the story had to be finished first, and the little invalid comfortably settled with a picture-book before she was at liberty to sit down and enjoy her letters.

Eddie's was written in camp, and was a month old :

DEAR OLIVE,

At last I have a quiet half-hour, and can let you know that I am alive and well after that terrible experience at Colenso. I would rather not write about it. You will see the sickening horrors piled on in the papers I expect. We have been resting since, and are nearly ready for another try. I must tell you of an unpleasant experience that I had with the enemy yesterday. I had rather an exciting time of it. I had to carry some despatches from the General to Colonel J——, who was out on a reconnaissance about ten miles down the river. I attached myself to some colonial scouts who were joining him, and we found the colonel's force in the thick of the skirmish with the enemy. Though bullets were flying pretty freely, I delivered my despatches without a scratch. It was on my return I was nearly done for. I took advantage of some brushwood to skirt round in the enemy's rear, but when I came out in the open I was spotted by a small party of scouts, and they instantly gave chase. Even then I think I should have distanced them easily, but suddenly thundering past me came a runaway horse. It was Mason, who is major of the — Hussars. His horse had been wounded in the thigh, and was simply mad with terror. I saw he couldn't pull up, and galloped on abreast with him, thinking we would come into our camp together. And then his horse bucked and threw him. I thought we were lost;

I reined up, dismounted, and with difficulty got him up behind me, for he had broken his right leg below the kneecap. The enemy were within a few yards of us now, and bullets were whistling by. I heard the thundering of a horse behind me, and I thought the next thing would be a bullet in poor Mason's back, so I wheeled round like lightning, levelled my rifle, and shot our pursuer. He fell like a stone out of his saddle, and we tore on. When we reached camp a bullet was found in my saddle, another had carried off the heel of my right boot, and Mason's helmet had three holes in it. Yet neither of us had a scratch. I was congratulated by the General on my lucky escape. I went to see Mason an hour or two after. His leg had just been set. He made me look rather foolish by the rot he talked, but he added (and this for your benefit!): "I hear you are one of the religious sort, so I suppose you don't believe in luck." I said "I preferred to consider myself in God's keeping." "Well," he said, "I wish I were in the same boat." So I sat down and gave him my experience, and I did what I never thought I could have done. I gave him your letter to read; you know which one. He asked me this morning if he might keep it a bit longer. I knew you wouldn't mind; he is very struck with it. I am kept pretty busy, and feel like an orderly, but it's grand to be free from all my old temptations. We have so much to do and think of here that idle moments are few. I hope our next try at Ladysmith will be a success. His Grace must be longing to be out. I suppose you haven't heard anything of him for an age. Communication is difficult, and the Boers are massed between us and them. Tell Giles' mother her son is very fit. His devotion to his master is a joke out here! He sat down and cried because I wouldn't let him come with me yesterday. My respects to Diogenes. Do you think if I got half a dozen V. C.'s and an empty coat sleeve (it must be the left, for a hero is never awkward!) that Dot would look at me? Good-bye. They say this will be a long affair, so don't expect me home just yet. I can tell you the sights of a battlefield sober the wildest chaps out here.

Your affectionate brother,

ED.

Olive's eyes were moist with tears as she finished this. She thought of her gay reckless young brother flinging away his money right and left; a constant and

increasing source of anxiety to all his family; and now the same gay bright spirit, but deepened and softened by unseen influence; as brave and courageous as he had been, but equally ready to meet death, or to help a comrade on the way to heaven.

No fears now for him, only happy assurance that he was in the keeping of One who would keep him "against that day."

And then Ida's plaintive voice brought her back to the sick room.

"Beautiful is tired; her back hurts, and she thinks she would like her hair cut. May I have the scissors?"

Olive bent down and kissed the white little face. "I shouldn't cut her hair, she has only one little tuft left, and it will never grow again."

"Beautiful and me is tired. We've had nothing to do all day. Supposing I had died and gone to heaven where would Beautiful have gone?"

Olive could hardly reply to this question, but Ida insisted on an answer.

"I think I would have wrapped her up in a white silk handkerchief, and put her in a drawer," said Olive at length.

"And not put her in a proper grave in the churchyard?"

"No, perhaps some sick little girl might have been glad to have her."

"She shan't have her, she shan't! Beautiful belongs to me for ever and ever, and I shan't die if she can't die with me."

"I think God has been so good as to spare your life, darling, because He wants you to grow up and be a use-

ful little servant of His. You must try and be very good, and thank Him for all the care He has taken of you since you have been ill."

"I think p'raps I'd better have gone to heaven," said Ida reflectively. "I shouldn't be kept in one room there and not allowed to open the window a tiny bit, or do anything I wanted to!"

Olive wisely ignored this remark.

"I will tell you a secret," she said, taking the child into her lap. "Do you know why I am feeding you up and taking such care of you?"

"No, why?"

"Because directly you get a little bit strong, I am going to take you right away to the seaside. A nice little warm sunny place, where you can play about on the sands. I have written to a friend of Mrs. March's who has rooms to let, and she is getting them ready for us. We shall have a nice bow window looking out on the sea, where we shall see all the ships go by. And if you take your medicines well, and don't fret, I think we may be able to go next week."

Ida's cheeks got pink with excitement.

Such news made her forget her weariness and discontent, and for the next few days her whole mind and thoughts were on the coming visit.



## CHAPTER XXI

“TELL ME YOU ARE GLAD TO SEE ME!”

I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,  
I shun the love that lurks in all delight —  
The love of thee—and in the blue heaven's height  
And in the dearest passage of a song.  
Oh just beyond the sweetest thoughts that throng  
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright;  
But it must never, never come in sight;  
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.

—*Alice Meynell.*

THEY went away to the sea, and Ida rapidly gained strength. At times, and especially when the child was in bed at night, a fit of loneliness would come over Olive. She fought against it bravely, and filled up her time by working for the soldiers at the Front. Even Ida was induced to knit some caps, and it was a great triumph to get any work done by those restless little fingers.

Osmond brightened their life by his amusing letters, which arrived every two or three days, giving details of the farm and village life which Olive had now learnt to love so well. And Mrs. Hunt wrote continually. Mr. Hunt was much better, and they were already looking forward to their return. They were anxious about their child's illness, but Olive still wrote every three or four days with an account of her. Mrs. Hunt's letters were very characteristic, amusing and frank; with a touch of that freshness in thought and feeling that was so attractive to Olive.

"I am coming home with fresh resolves and vows to attend to my husband more and my parish less," she wrote. "I have been schooled this winter in woman's true vocation, and I am developing into a regular stay-at-home—but oh, how I hate it! And if my husband's opinion were asked, he would say he hated it too. When he was really ill, he appreciated my devotion; now he is nearly well, my constant presence distracts and irritates him. 'My dear, won't you go out?' he says appealingly. 'I daren't,' I say with a sigh. 'That good German lady on the next floor met me yesterday, and condemned the whole English race of wives for being heartless gad-about with no idea of cooking, and a supreme indifference to their husband's comfort and happiness.' This said German matron keeps a lynx eye on all my actions and words. I begin to think sometimes that perhaps if one has a bullying nature, it is better to bully outside the home, than in it. I said something of this sort to her, and she threw up her fat hands like a Frenchwoman. 'Ach! what a misfortune for the poor man! His home a house of peace only when it is emptied of his wife!' So you see there are two sides to the question. I hope our chick is not wearing you out. Can you instil into her small mind that she must grow up and cover her mother's delinquencies? What battles royal we should have had together if I had been her nurse. Dear mite, if I were more patient a mother I know I could do more with her. But as I tell you, I am coming back with a host of good resolutions to be put into practice!"

With such letters as these to read and answer, Olive got through her days. And as Ida improved in health

and spirits, she soon found her time fully occupied in curbing a little of that small maiden's energy. The war news brought fresh anxiety day by day, but the arrival of Lord Roberts raised her spirits, as indeed it did of all.

It was on the very day that Kimberley was relieved that Olive and Ida returned to the Farm. The beds in the front garden were full of crocuses and snowdrops, and the Marches all came to the door to greet them.

Osmond received them with delight, and complimented them both on their improved looks.

"Beautiful and me is quite well again," said Ida with a beaming face, "and we shall be quite naughty again I'm afraid, for it's only sick people that are good!"

"I think a little girl forgets how impatient and fretful she was when she was too ill to go out."

"Ah," said Ida unabashed; "but that wasn't real naughtiness, like wading in the pond and chasing the ducks, or driving the pigs into the kitchen, or locking old Stephen up in the belfry when he's ringing the bells, that's what Beautiful and me is afraid of doing again!"

"We must begin lessons at once then to guard against such a possibility," said Olive.

Ida look thoughtful, and said no more.

"And now, Diogenes, tell me all the news," said Olive that evening after Ida had been put to bed. "You don't know how good it feels to be back here again, and have you to talk to. I don't think I should do to live alone. I am too fond of talking!"

"What can I tell you? Dot has been over to visit me in my solitude. I often wonder if anything will come of Eddie's devotion to her. She is so intensely anxious and interested about him now."

"She is too fond of her father to leave him. How is Sir Marmaduke?"

"Fairly well, but very anxious about his Grace. They have heard nothing of him since you have been away. 'No news is good news.' I am hoping he is quite convalescent by this time. Isn't it good about Kimberley?"

"Yes, if only Ladysmith could be the next to be relieved."

"Perhaps it will be. Buller won't be beaten. He is just advancing for the fourth time!"

"Don't let us talk of the war now. How are the villagers?"

"Mrs. Giles is still the centre of attraction. She got a long letter from her son last week; Miss March came in and told me all about it. The postman told her. He said the postmaster had sent word to Mrs. Giles to come to get it, as he couldn't spare any one to take it to her, she being out of the postman's beat. Rather Irish wasn't it? Miss March straightway seized hold of her bonnet and tore off to the village. The poor little widow had to read it out loud to an admiring throng. The post-office was crowded, and there was quite a scene. I was told it was a 'beautiful letter,' and made all the women cry at the account of the soldiers' sufferings. Mrs. Giles was quite overcome, and walked back to her cottage leaning on the arms of Miss March and the sexton!"

Olive smiled, then sighed.

"We always come back to the war. Have you heard of Mrs. Crofton at all?"

"Nothing particular. She is cool and composed, and is much occupied with the agent—improving the estate."

"And Vinny and Elsie?"

"Still in town. You must have heard from them?"

"Yes, Vinny has written once or twice. Not Elsie. She seems entirely engrossed with gaiety at present."

They talked on, and Olive laid her head on her pillow that night with great content at being back again.

The next fortnight was an exciting one, culminating with the relief of Ladysmith. Two days after, Olive received a telegram from Eddie.

"Duke nearly convalescent. Have seen him."

And the same day brought a similar message to Sir Marmaduke from Duke himself.

"Now he will be coming home," said Osmond in delight.

"If he is quite well, perhaps he will not be able to get leave," said Olive dubiously.

And this was the view that Cora took, when Olive went over to see her. She looked anxious and rather haggard, Olive thought, and still seemed almost averse to the idea of Duke's return.

"He says nothing of returning in his telegram," she said. "I suppose we shall have a letter soon which will tell us of his intentions."

And so they waited on, and Olive tried to banish him from her thoughts. It was spring again now, and the old Farm was full of the sweet scents of the primroses and hyacinths that bordered the flower beds. Ida danced in and out of the house with her hands full of flowers. She was the sunshine of the Farm, and, in spite of all her pranks and mischief, occupied a large place in the Marches' affections.

Lessons went on regularly, and the little girl was cer-

tainly far more tractable and amenable to discipline than she had been a few months previously.

One day Olive went over to lunch with Muriel, and early in the afternoon she left the Manor and went over to Crofton Court. Cora was out, but she went up and sat with Sir Marmaduke and tried to cheer him up. She found him depressed in spirits, with the same old cry :

"When will Duke come home!"

"You may hear very soon from him," said Olive cheerily; "isn't it a great relief to think that he is free at last, and that dreadful siege is over?"

"Oh yes, yes, but why doesn't he come home? Everything is going wrong as I keep telling you. Cora takes too much upon herself. Women always make mistakes if they try to do men's business. My dear wife was of course an exception to the rule. But Cora—well, my dear Olive—she wants her husband to manage her—and that's the fact! I am a poor old man bereft of both my sons. Mark might as well be dead and buried for all the good he is to me! I never hear of him. And Duke prefers the excitement of battle to looking after his lonely father."

"Now I will not let you talk so," said Olive. "Let us change the subject." She was making him laugh at some of Ida's queer sayings, when she heard a carriage drive up, and a little bustle in the hall. Thinking it was Cora who had returned from some visits, she went on talking; but in a few minutes the door of the room opened, and Triggs, tremulous with emotion, ushered in Duke himself. He looked gaunt and feeble, and yet the light in his eyes, as he advanced, brought a thrill to Olive's heart.

"Well, father, I have taken you by surprise! And Olive here too! It seems good to have such a welcome."

Sir Marmaduke placed both his trembling hands on his son's broad shoulders as he stooped over him, and Olive was surprised at his composure.

"I have been expecting you every day for months," he said. "You must never leave me again, lad!"

Then Duke turned to Olive. The sudden shock of seeing him once again standing there, with just the same old smile and earnest gaze, was almost too much for her. The colour ebbed away from her cheeks and lips, and when he took her hand in his it was cold and trembling.

"Tell me you are glad to see me again, Olive," he said, and she felt the deep tenderness underlying his simple words. For a moment she hesitated, and then, with a little queenly gesture of her head, she drew her hand away from his.

"I am always glad to see old friends again," she said gravely. "I am only sorry that Cora is not here to welcome you." Then, turning to the window, she looked out, fancying she heard Cora's return.

Duke sat down by his father's side a little heavily. "You have found Cora a comfort to you, father, have you not?" he said.

"Yes, yes—she is a capable woman," Sir Marmaduke said a little impatiently. "How are you, my boy? Are your wounds healed?"

"Very nearly. The voyage did wonders for me. But I feel rather a rag at times. You are looking fairly well yourself."

"Oh, I am just the same, neither better nor worse. A useless old log! The good has been taken, the bad left!"

"Poor dear mother," said Duke under his breath; "it is a sad home-coming to me!"

Olive felt she would be better away, and was just slipping out of the room, when Sir Marmaduke called her back.

"Don't go, my dear, stay till Cora comes in, and have some tea. You and Duke were always such friends, that you will like to hear about his adventures."

"I think Cora has just come in," replied Olive. "Here she is!" Cora entered the room in gay spirits.

Triggs was too busy telling the news of the captain's return to the rest of the household to be in his usual place, and she came up to Sir Marmaduke in perfect ignorance of Duke's arrival.

But when she caught sight of Duke, even Olive was startled by the terror depicted in her face.

Duke himself stepped forward smiling.

"Well, Cora, here I am at last. Why, you look as if I were an apparition! What is the matter?"

Cora gasped for self-control, then impulsively laid her hand on his arm.

"I want to speak to you alone—at once! Come."

She drew him out of the room after her, before any one could speak, and Sir Marmaduke looked with puzzled eyes at Olive.

"What is the matter with her? Why has she taken Duke away? I want him," he said querulously.

"It is natural they should like to meet alone," said



Olive soothingly. "You will be happy now he is home, will you not?"

But as she talked, she was wondering how it was that Cora met her husband with so little joy and affection; why his sudden advent seemed to inspire her with such terror. She herself was longing to be away, and she made a movement to go, but Sir Marmaduke would not hear of it.

"Stay till Duke comes back," he begged her. "You are all wanting to leave me, why doesn't he come? What is Cora doing?"

It needed all Olive's tact and persuasion to prevent the old man from violently ringing his bell and summoning them to his presence.

As time went on, and still Duke did not appear, Olive felt quite uncomfortable. She did not want him to find her still there when he came back; it was getting late, and she knew Osmond was expecting her by the six o'clock train.

At last, to her intense relief, she heard his step in the passage, and she rose to go as he entered the room.

"What a long time you have been," Sir Marmaduke exclaimed; "I have hardly seen you for five minutes yet. You will have plenty of time to talk to your wife by-and-by."

"I am sorry, father."

Duke spoke and looked like a man in a dream. He seemed stunned, bewildered, and unconscious of Olive's presence.

"Good-bye, Sir Marmaduke, I can leave you in good hands now," said Olive cheerfully.

Then Duke moved towards the door and held it open

for her, but his eyes avoided hers, and when she held out her hand he hardly touched it. She felt him give a quick sigh of relief as she passed out.

Olive echoed that sigh as she left the house, and she wished that she had not been led that way that afternoon.

When she came back to Osmond, she told him the news with quiet gravity.

“I wonder,” he said, “if Duke will make his way over here. I long to see him and hear about his experiences.”

“I think he will have his hands full at home for some time yet. Sir Marmaduke hopes he will look over everything.”

“Did you hear anything about Mark? Does Duke know whether he is at home or abroad? And Eddie too, did he tell you of the meeting between them?”

“I heard nothing. I did not stay, for I was not needed.”

Osmond glanced at Olive. Her face was quite cheerful, and she spoke in the most matter-of-fact tone. He could only conclude that Duke’s arrival was not a matter of importance to her. He himself longed to see him, for Duke was the only friend he possessed, and he had missed him sorely.

He little knew that upstairs Olive was pacing her room with clenched hands and strained face.

“I must not, *will* not think of him. Oh Duke, I wish I had never known you! To be in the same room with you now is torture. May God help me to wean you from my thoughts.”

## CHAPTER XXII

### BAD NEWS

Ill news hath wings, and with the wind doth go.

—*Drayton.*

THE next morning, between eleven and twelve, as Olive was in the midst of lessons with her small pupil, she was surprised by a visit from Muriel.

She was riding, and was, she said, supposed to be out hunting with her father; but she had left him and ridden off by herself to the Farm.

"I was only four miles off, so I couldn't resist coming to you. If you will have me to lunch, father will send a groom for me about three o'clock."

"We shall be very pleased," piped out Ida; "because there'll be no lessons, and Beautiful and me wants to do some washing."

"Go along, you monkey," said Olive, shutting up the lesson books and drawing a chair near the fire for her guest.

Muriel looked strangely excited, and directly Ida had scampered away she turned to Olive eagerly.

"Have you heard?"

"What?"

"Have you heard nothing from Crofton Court?"

"Oh, you mean Duke's return. Yes, I was there yesterday when he appeared and took us by surprise."

"My dear Olive, I feel like any old scandal-monger. Where is Diogenes?"

"In his room, he always leaves us free at lesson time, and I think it is better. Do you want him?"

"Oh no, I would rather tell you first alone, though after all, the whole place is ringing with it. You know what servants are?"

"Oh Dot, don't keep me in suspense. What has happened?"

"Mrs. Crofton has gone off with that agent, Mr. Mordaunt."

"Never! oh I cannot believe it!"

Olive stared at Muriel absolutely incredulous.

"It is only too true, I'm afraid," said Muriel. "Isn't it awful! I cried for nearly an hour this morning when I heard it. For Duke is such a splendid fellow, and to think, when he comes home sick and wounded, that this should be his reception. Oh, how could she, how could she do it!"

"How did you hear?"

"Father saw them himself. He had come down from town late last night. It was about ten o'clock. He was talking to the stationmaster about something, when he saw Mrs. Crofton, carrying a handbag, hurriedly get into the up train to London, and Mr. Mordaunt follow her, a porter putting a portmanteau into their carriage. Father came straight home and told me, and he said he wasn't a bit surprised: he had been expecting it a long time, for they have been so much together."

"But," said Olive gasping, "she's a married woman! She is Duke's wife!"

"Yes, I was furious with father for hinting at such a thing, but the first thing we heard this morning was that Mrs. Crofton had disappeared, and no one knew

where she was. Of course the news came through one of our grooms, but he had met Triggs, and he told him that the upset at the Court was dreadful, for the agent had decamped too. I can hardly believe it, can you?"

"No," said Olive emphatically. "I won't until there is further proof of her intentions. It may have been an accidental meeting at the station."

"I wish I could think so!"

"Oh, it is too dreadful, Dot! I should think it would kill Duke! And poor old Sir Marmaduke!"

"Did you see Mrs. Crofton yesterday?"

Olive gave an account of her visit. Muriel listened thoughtfully.

"I wonder what she said to him. It is all most mysterious. She seemed more terrified than pleased at his appearance?"

"Yes, I thought so."

"Isn't it strange that Duke should have married such a woman? I have never liked her, as you know. But I do feel so sorry for him."

"What an awful scandal it will make in Blackenbury! I can't help hoping there may be some explanation."

"Father felt inclined to go straight off to the Court, and then he thought it would be better not; at all events not till we hear the news from them."

Olive seemed almost stunned by such tidings. She roused herself at last, and gave orders for lunch to be brought in without delay. Then Osmond appeared and they could not keep him long in ignorance of what had happened, for he saw at once by their sober faces, that there was some bad news.

He was, like Olive, incredulous at first; and then he sighed heavily as he thought of his friend, and of what this would mean to him.

"Well," said Olive after they had discussed it for some time; "let us leave the subject now. It is bad enough, and we shall not make it better by talking about it."

"Have you heard from Eddie?" asked Muriel, at once taking the hint.

"Not since his telegram after the relief of Ladysmith. We are expecting word every day. And we are longing to hear from Duke how he met him."

"Poor Eddie! He has been in the thick of it, hasn't he? I shall never forget his coming over to wish us good-bye. He looked so radiant and young. I thought of Pelleas in *The Idylls of the King*. Do you remember?—'The sunshine came along with him.' Eddie always brightens every one he comes across. His very looks do it."

"I remember," Olive said, "that our old nurse always said she could never punish Eddie when he was naughty, for he had a way of smiling so seraphically at her, that her heart melted at once."

Then as lunch was over, the two girls sauntered out into the garden, Eddie being still under discussion.

"I remember he told me that he was going to steady down," Muriel said gravely. "He said his time in his regiment had not been a happy epoch in his life, and such a light came into his face as he added, 'Forward, onward, upward, is my motto now.' I felt as I looked at him what an ideal young knight he would have made if he had lived long ago."

"But," said Olive, "you would not like him for your knight. You laugh at his devotion, Dot."

"No indeed not. I was quite touched by it when he went away. He seemed so much in earnest. He wanted to make me promise I would write to him, and when that failed he begged to be allowed to write to me. I gave him permission to do that, and he went away with a lingering hope that good might come of it."

"I wonder if you will ever marry," Olive said, looking at the bright young face now sparkling with animation.

Muriel shook her head.

"I am too fond of wandering."

"You might get a husband who was fond of wandering too."

"No, I am sure I should not. I have seen many men abroad. They like their wives for a time, but those who have the real love for travel and adventure always heave a sigh of relief, when their wives decide to remain behind. They hinder their progress; a woman wants so much more in travelling than a man. If their husbands are fond of them they are always anxious about their safety; if they are not, they are bored to death with attending to their wants."

"Yet your father likes you with him."

"Yes, but he is an old and experienced traveller, and takes his journeys very easily. He is not like these red hot discoverers, who are always for pushing to the front, and going where no one has gone before."

"Ah well," said Olive with a little smile, "you will get tired of travelling one day, and want to have a fire-side of your own."

"But I must see a good bit more before I do that. And by that time I shall be a haggard, weather-beaten old woman!"

They walked round the old garden paths for a little time in silence.

The spring sunshine was resting lovingly on the baby green of trees and bushes; the birds were ecstatic in their notes of joy at the coming summer. Olive lifted her head, and drew in a long breath of the fresh, sweet air around her.

"Are you happy here, Olive?" asked Muriel wonderingly. "Don't you feel very dull sometimes?"

"No, not now. I have the parish left in my charge," laughed Olive. "I am very happy. Idleness and inactivity are the only things that try me. Don't you think we have very cosy quarters?"

"Yes, but you haven't many friends round here. Don't you miss them very much?"

"A little sometimes; but it is wonderful how one can do without them. I have you still. And I never made many friends in Blackenbury."

"You are wasted here," said Muriel with energy; "and I shall get up a series of dinner parties and musical evenings, and make you come over and help me to entertain."

"You ridiculous child! I am no more wasted here than you are in the Rocky Mountains. No one is wasted anywhere. I think I am more useful here than I should be at a dinner party!"

"Oh yes, *useful*!" said Muriel turning up her little nose in disdain.

"And happy," added Olive with emphasis. "The two go together to my mind."



Three o'clock came very soon, and Muriel's groom appeared for her. As she rode away, Ida seized hold of Olive ecstatically.

"That's how Beautiful and me will ride through the world when we're big, only I shall have a prince with curly hair, and he shall do everything I tell him at once!"

"Ay, missy," said Andrew who was closing his gate carefully. "'A'll be bound ye'll keep the young fellows in order. Nowadays 'tis the women are uppermost, quite contrairy to the scriptures, but 'A've no doubt they'll be taught their place in heaven. For 'He that exalteth himself shall be abased.' And they'll have to take the lowest seat, an' be filled with confusion."

"Oh Andrew, for shame," said Olive laughing; "is that what you want to bring me to?"

"No, Miss Tracy," called out Bess from the door, "'tis me that he's hittin' at, and all because I remind him that the best apples remain on the tree; 'tis the rotten ones that fall into the arms of any passer by! 'Spinster' he may call me, but spinster, by choice and persuasion; and many would be proud at this minit to come at my call if I didn't know they wasn't my equal in birth or eddication or manners, and not a fittin' match in any respect for one that is so above them."

Olive turned in with a smile, but wisely let Andrew and his sister-in-law continue their discussion alone. She went up to her room, and prayed for a quiet mind.

Muriel's news had distressed her greatly, and in spite of such circumstantial evidence she could not bring herself to believe it.

Far into the night she lay awake, thinking it over,

and wondering if she could do anything to help her old friend.

"Perhaps if I had been more patient and considerate, more tolerant of Cora's annoying manner towards me, I could have won her friendship, and saved her from making such a shipwreck of her life and of her husband's. I might have influenced her for good, instead of which I left her to herself, and she owed to Vinny that she had not a friend in Blackenbury. Oh, what a tangle life is, and why has this been allowed to happen to Duke, of all people!"

She fell asleep at last; but her sleep was troubled and broken, and she came to breakfast the next morning with such a pale face and heavy eyes that even Ida noticed it.

"I don't think we're quite well enough to do lessons," she remarked. "Beautiful and me will take a holiday, and then you can lie down and nurse your headache!"

Olive smiled, but Ida did not get her wish, and lessons proceeded as usual.

Whilst Olive's interests was now centring near home, the struggle in South Africa was still going on. A comparative lull succeeded the capitulation of Cronje and the relief of Ladysmith, but Eddie was kept busy on the staff of his General, and more than once he had narrow escapes from the enemy.

One morning Giles received an early summons to his master's tent. He and a few other men were enjoying some fishing in the river that ran by their camp, and when he returned to his comrades a little later with the announcement that he was going off at once with "the Captin," to carry despatches, there was a good deal of discussion about it.

"Them despatches will be your death afore you've done wi' 'em!" said Giles' chum, a fresh faced, broad-shouldered lad, who took the gloomiest view of everything.

"If you get popped, old chap, speak a word to the Captin for me," shouted an oldish man; as he stood knee deep in the river, and flung his line furiously backwards and forwards, with the vague idea that speed and splash were necessary to attract his prey.

"The Captin don't favour your sort, Guzzle," said the man next him.

"Ay, but I'm on the tack now, and I'm sick o' spendin' my days a-doin' nothin'. I'd like a bit of a brush with these skulkin' varmints! I'd turn a Bible thumper, to be in your shoes, young feller! And I'm a tidy sort o' groom when I put my mind to it."

"Giv' our respects to them bloomin' rascals, and say we're a comin' after you to giv' 'em a taste of the bay'net! That'll fetch 'em up a bit!"

Giles stood for a moment in silence before his comrades. The fresh cool morning air fanned his temples. Soon, he knew the sun would be in all its power, but it was not yet six o'clock. He looked away to some distant hills standing up, gaunt and ragged against the clear golden sky; then his gaze fell on the little party by the river bank.

"Look here," he said with an effort. "You laugh at me for being a Bible thumper, but I have a strange feeling this morning, that this may be my last chance of saying a word to you. We've seen a good many chaps go under, and my turn may be comin'. I'd like you to know if it does come, that I was ready to go. And it's

a grand thing to be able to step into heaven so quick, and know your sins is washed away, so that you're safe to go in! Wouldn't you be all happier if you knew it too?"

There was something in Giles' upright figure, and glowing boyish face, that arrested the attention of his careless comrades. They stared at him without speaking.

"'Look unto Me, and be ye saved!' That is the Lord's message to us soldiers when death is so busy around us!" Then taking off his helmet, he waved a farewell to them; and dashed off to bring the horses round to his master's tent.

A little later, they were galloping across the veldt. Quickly, but cautiously they made their way. Every bush or rock might conceal a hidden foe. Four troopers accompanied them, and for the most part of the way there was silence. It was only seven miles to their destination, the other British camp; but every mile was a dangerous one, and they knew it.

Eddie's fair young face was set in keen grim lines; his glance flashed first on one side, and then on the other. A little rise of the ground in front with some rugged brown rocks soon occupied his attention. He pointed it out to his men.

"Be ready," he said under his breath; and then suddenly, came the quick ping of bullets whizzing past them. Thick and fast they came. The foe was invisible, and although rifles were levelled at the rocks, it was doubtful whether the shots took effect. Eddie saw it was riding to certain death to pursue their way; he wheeled round to the left.

"Follow me," he cried; "and ride for your lives!"

One of the scouts uttered an ejaculation, then dropped from his saddle; his comrade stopped and hoisted him up beside him, the riderless horse, also wounded, tore away over the veldt in a state of maddened frenzy. Another bullet brought a horse with his rider to the ground, then Eddie was suddenly shot over his charger's head, as the animal made a sudden lurch forward and rolled in agony on the ground, bleeding profusely from three bullet wounds.

In an instant Giles wheeled up, dismounted, and was assisting his master to rise, when he staggered.

"Not hit, Giles!" exclaimed Eddie hoisting him up behind him. At the same moment a troop of about twenty or thirty Boers left their trenches, and came thundering up on their rough little ponies.

"Surrender! Surrender!" they cried.

Eddie looked round. All four of the troopers were wounded. He lowered his rifle, fired; then feeling Giles' grip of his belt relax, he put his left hand back and clutched hold of him spurring his horse madly on, and, in spite of a perfect hailstorm of bullets, managed to escape and outdistance his pursuers. He did not draw rein for three miles, until the white camp tents were plainly discernible, and then he said,

"Are you badly hurt, Giles?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Eddie gave a sharp look round.

Alas! His gaze fell on a red track behind his horse's footmarks in the sandy soil. He reined up under a scrubby, undersized mimosa tree, dismounted, and lifting Giles tenderly down, vainly tried to stem the red stream

trickling from his side over his kharki tunic. Giles' face had blue shadows upon it, and a grey pinched look that Eddie groaned to see.

"Have you got any bandages in your pocket? Ah, that's right. I'll do my best, but we shall soon be in camp."

Giles' lips moved.

"I'm done for—sir—don't trouble—leave me—ride on."

"Never. I am going to lift you up again, and we'll take it easy. Why, Giles lad, do you think I would forsake you!"

Eddie paused, and with sinking of heart he realised that Giles' strong young life was swiftly ebbing away.

"I believe you are going home, Giles," he said in an awed whisper.

The dying boy smiled.

"Tell—mother—it's so easy—going—safe in the arms of Jesus ——"

His head drooped; a tired sigh; and Giles had left this earth and was "present with the Lord."

When Eddie reached the British camp shortly after, he bore behind him the lifeless body of his brave young servant.

And when Giles' comrades were told the sad news, they looked at each other gravely.

"May I be prepared like him, when my time comes!" was the language of each of their hearts.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh Diogenes, look here!"

It was Olive who held the newspaper in her hand. The post had just come, and with it the London paper.

"Not Eddie, is it?" asked Osmond, taking the paper she offered him.

"Not wounded, thank God, but it is Giles."

It was a short paragraph at the bottom of the casualty list.

"Lieut. E. Tracy when carrying despatches yesterday was surrounded by a party of Boers. He was only attended by his servant and four troopers of R's Horse, and the little party, being outnumbered by the enemy, was called upon to surrender. Two of the troopers were killed, two wounded and taken prisoners. Lieut. Tracy and his servant Pte. A. Giles escaped. Lieut. Tracy's horse was shot under him, and his life only saved by his servant who dismounted, gave him his horse, and whilst in the act of mounting behind him, was mortally wounded. Lieut. Tracy reached camp bringing the body of his servant with him."

Olive's eyes were full of tears.

"What a miraculous escape for Eddie! But poor Mrs. Giles! Oh, how can I break it to her? I must go at once. Will you look after Ida till I come back?"

She was not long in making her way to the widow's cottage, but bad news always flies quickly. The post-master had told the tale directly he had seen it in the paper, and when she arrived at Mrs. Giles' she found that some of the villagers had already forestalled her. The little parlour seemed full of them. Mrs. Giles, in the abandonment of her grief, had flung her arms out upon the table, and, dropping her head in them, remained perfectly silent and immovable amidst the hushed and excited chatter around her.

"Here comes Miss Tracy!"

“’Tis her brother that ’ee give his life for ! ”

“ Likely she’ll do something for the poor soul ! ”

“ Ay, dear me ! She’ll feel it to be her brother’s doin’ ! ”

“ As the scripture says : ‘ One shall be taken, and the t’other left ’ ! ”

Olive passed them swiftly ; then bent over the poor little widow, and put her hand tenderly on her shoulder.

“ I wish I had been the first to tell you,” she said. “ Oh Mrs. Giles, I do feel for you ! What can I say to comfort you ? ”

Mrs. Giles raised her face. It was white and tearless ; and there were hard strained lines about her eyes and mouth. The piteous look in her dark eyes, as she gazed up into Olive’s face without a word, was heart-breaking. Olive, with tears in her own eyes, stooped and kissed her. There was a little murmur of approval from the neighbours : aprons went up to their faces, and there were several audible sniffs and sobs.

Then Mrs. Giles spoke.

“ Send them away ! ”

This seemed base ingratitude to the onlookers. Olive gently asked them to leave, and they crept off.

Outside the cottage their voices were raised in indignant protest.

“ Me to be sent away, that were so full o’ thought and feelin’ for the widder, that I had scarcely a bite o’ breakfast, and left me washin’ and all me work, and came off in such tearin’ haste that I clean forgot the saucepan on the fire, which will have boiled over and spoilt me nice clean stove a-blackleaded all fresh this mornin’ ! ”



"Ah well, Mrs. Shaw, ye didn't leave two little uns as I did, and if my John comes home and finds no dinner, and the children upsettin' the whole house 'twill be a poor reward I shall have for goin' on such an errand of mercy, and gettin' no thanks for it!"

"'Tis astonishin' how some folks takes all that is done for 'em, and turns and behaves so impolite in one's face, but there poor crittur, she be beside herself, and she won't be able to have no funeral!"

This caused general consternation.

"Us must have a funeral for the honour of 'im! And he a soldier, and died such a beautiful death; why there must be a funeral, surely!"

"'Twouldn't be decent not to have his funeral, like a gaol bird that was hung! Us must have the funeral, 'tis enough to make his dear father turn in his grave!"

"Dearie me! What a misfortune for the poor thing, and she that has bin so respected like latterly, her will never get over it, a death wi'out a funeral! Who'd a thought poor Alfred would a come to this!"

Olive meanwhile was sitting down by Mrs. Giles' side. Neither spoke for some time. Olive felt that in presence of such a grief she had nothing to say.

Presently Mrs. Giles looked up.

"The Almighty has took everything from me. He has got 'em all, and He hasn't left me no one. I'm a lone, miserable widder!"

"Alfred is so happy," whispered Olive. "He was a dear, good lad. I remember my brother told me once, he used to find him reading his Bible at odd moments, and I used to wish my brother was more like him. Let us think of his happiness, dear Mrs. Giles."

"What business had they to shoot my boy?" asked Mrs. Giles fiercely and unreasonably. "He hadn't done them no harm, the cowardly murderers! I'd like to get the law on 'em that I would. I'd like to see 'em swing for it!"

"Let us ask God to comfort you!" said Olive, her heart aching for the poor little woman.

They knelt down and Olive prayed. Mrs. Giles listened and rose to her feet with her face set and hard.

"I can't take the words in yet, Miss. Thank you kindly. I don't see as how—not meanin' to be wicked—as even the Almighty could comfort me! Not unless He gives him back agen to me! He was so young, so strong, such a lot o' years to live to be so old as his poor father!"

"He died a hero's death," said Olive softly.

Mrs. Giles had buried her face again in her arms, and not a word did she say.

Olive sat on, and waited, then taking up a Bible she commenced to read a few verses from the fifteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians. The familiar words that Mrs. Giles had heard in the churchyard over many a grave, made her look up in dazed horror.

"Miss, how am I to have his funeral?"

The awful fact took hold of her, as the news of his death had not done, and in a moment she burst into hysterical weeping. Her tempest of sobs seemed to shake her almost to pieces, but the tears softened and relieved her strain of mind.

"I shall never, never lift up my head, to have him die without a funeral! No coffin, no grave! Oh Miss, what shall I ever do! What will the neighbours think

and say ! 'Tis the will of God. I won't rebel against it, but oh dear Miss, do help me to get a funeral for him !”

Olive promised to talk it over with the clergyman who was taking Mr. Hunt's duty, and at last, when she was quieter, she left her, and retraced her steps to the Farm with a heavy heart.

The excitement in the village was great over poor Alfred's death ; subscriptions were raised for a memorial tablet, and when there was a short memorial service held in the church, not a villager was absent. Eddie wrote soon after giving a full account of the affair.

After giving Giles' last words, he wrote :

Tell Mrs. Giles she may well be proud of her son. He saved my life at the cost of his own. It was his dismounting that did it, but even at such a crisis, he would do things in correct style ! I hauled him up, but it was too late. I just managed to keep him from slipping, and when we were safe from the enemy, I lifted him down and did what I could to make him comfortable. He was ready and happy to go. I sobbed like a child when I got back to camp. We gave him a proper funeral and I'm putting a stone up over him. I shall never get another servant like him. He was “ faithful unto death.”

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A MISERABLE WOMAN

Weak is that throne, and in itself unsound,  
Which takes not solid virtue for its ground.

—*Churchill.*

WHEN Duke was summoned by Cora to follow her, and he left his father and Olive to do so, he little thought of the revelation that was coming upon him.

He wondered at Cora's agitation, but when she led him to his mother's boudoir, which she had appropriated for her own use since her arrival, he was too overcome by the old associations of his mother's presence there, to take much heed of her tone and manner.

He seated himself in the chair he had so often occupied before, when in confabulation with Lady Crofton about family or business matters. Cora unknowingly caused him to wince, by the unceremonious way in which she drew Lady Crofton's easy chair up to the fire; and, with a fan in her hand, shielded herself from his observation by holding it between her face and him.

"Well," he said kindly, looking across at her as he spoke; "what is it, Cora, that you want to tell me?"

"I have a confession to make. I don't want you to judge me till you have heard my side. I would have prepared you if I could. I have been miserable, wretched! And things have got worse and worse. Will you hear me from the beginning and be merciful?"

She was speaking feverishly, and her voice trembled with emotion.

Duke gazed at her in wonder for a moment, then said gently:

"I don't think I could be anything but merciful to you, Cora, knowing your circumstances."

She caught in her breath quickly, then rose from her seat, and clinging to the high mantel-board above the fire hid her face in her hands.

"You remember your arrangements. You wrote to Lady Crofton and told her all. I came here expecting to be received by her, and found her gone. Miss Tracy was staying with your father. She welcomed me as if she knew all about it, and took me to Sir Marmaduke, and he was most kind; but I thought he was a little weak in intellect, as he treated me as your wife, and not Mark's!"

"Well," said Duke quietly as her voice broke; "what next?"

"I did not undeceive him. I thought it was his fancy, but he said that if I had been Mark's wife I should not have entered his house. That was a pleasant thing to hear on my arrival! I was tired, worn out and dazed, and I could not understand it. After dinner that evening Miss Tracy made it clear to me. She told me that Lady Crofton had received your letter when very ill, that it had been lost or destroyed before any one saw it but herself, and she had told her when half-delirious that I was your wife, and that she and Sir Marmaduke must welcome me as such. I suppose she mixed up your names. Miss Tracy said she seemed very distressed about something, but could not explain; and died before

they could learn any more. I found when I came, that every one was prepared to receive me, but only as *your* wife."

Again she paused. Duke's mind was back in his mother's sick room. He looked dreamily into the fire, and seemed to have forgotten for the time Cora's existence. Then he started, as she lifted her face up and confronted him defiantly.

"Are you asleep? Oh, I thought you were. Well I suppose you can guess the rest."

He shook his head. "I suppose when you explained, my father understood and welcomed you."

Cora's eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot.

"Oh you men! How can you understand! Can't you see my position? It was cruel to bring me into it. So much was taken for granted, so few questions asked. Have you no pity for the girl tricked away from her father's house, only discovering her husband's deceit after marriage, and then forsaken by her family at the time she needed them most! *You* are responsible for what I have done, and you alone; for you made me think Mark's wife would be welcomed; you sent me over here, an outcast among strangers, and then when the ground seemed slipping away from under my feet, you expected me to behave like a saint, and meekly expose myself, to be driven forth without a home, and without a friend!"

Cora's passion blazed forth so furiously, that Duke rose to his feet, alert and interested at once.

"I wish you would explain things a little more clearly, Cora. What has happened? When you first came here you were mistaken for my wife. Did you not explain your identity?"

Cora's passion died away beneath the keen penetrating glance of Duke's clear grey eyes.

She had no great powers of self-control, and fright and misery were getting the upper hand of her.

"Oh don't be hard upon me," she said, tears rising in her eyes. "I never was great in moral courage. I have not undeceived them, and they have none of them any idea that I am not your wife. Listen, and do have pity."

But Duke would not listen. He broke in with such stern amazement, that Cora shrank in fear from his gaze.

"Do you mean to tell me that for all these months you have been living and acting a lie? You have been passing yourself off as my wife, and making my father—Miss Tracy—believe it?"

Olive's name brought a little bitter smile to Cora's lips.

In his horror, Duke betrayed the real sting of the matter to him, and Cora took advantage of it at once.

"They were only too ready to believe it," she said a little scornfully. "Miss Tracy was the originator of such a statement. She was not at all surprised. Why should she be? She had told every one that I was your bride before my arrival. I have been impassive all along, they forced me to conceal my identity when I had no intention of doing so. Oh, I know I have done wrong, and if you had not come back so suddenly, I should have acted differently now. I did not mean to be here when you returned."

"And may I ask," said Duke pacing the room in his agitation; "what has become of my letters? How is it that my father did not discover in them the real truth?"

Cora sank back in her chair and began to sob.

"Don't catechise me so! It has been like a hideous nightmare. Your father never reads any letters, I always read them to him."

"I see!"

There was a little silence. At last Duke came and stood on the hearthrug. His face looked set and hard.

"And now what do you wish me to do?"

"Just have mercy on me for—for to-night," sobbed Cora. "Don't disgrace me before every one. Keep silent till to-morrow. Oh Duke, you were so kind to me at home, don't be so hard on me now. I'm a miserable woman, and have no proper home!"

"I do not want to be hard on you," said Duke, his tone softening as he glanced at the tearful shrinking little figure in the chair; "but a course of deception like this is past my comprehension, and I fail to think how you could have pursued it! I can make allowances, for the first night perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances of your arrival. Even that would be difficult to imagine, but when one realises all that this long deception entails, how many people have been included in it, I think you must allow that I have a right to be annoyed!"

"I have been living here as Sir Marmaduke's daughter-in-law," said Cora, a little of the old fire coming back to her eye; "and I am that, in spite of all that you can say. I have never changed my name. It may be very difficult for you to imagine in your immaculate goodness and uprightness! But it was one of your family who first taught me how to deceive. It was a Crofton who deceived me, and I wish with all my heart



that I had never set eyes on either of you. Mark has ruined my life; you step in with your assurances of comfort, and then you bring me to this! I suppose you are longing to call the whole household up, and point the finger of scorn at me—the usurper! Well, do it, do it now, and then your sense of justice will be satisfied!”

Duke bore this angry tirade in silence. He was tired and weary with his journey, weakened by his wounds, and a woman of Cora's type was past his comprehension. It was a bitter shock, when coming home, with his heart full of unfulfilled longings, and hope for his future, he had been met with this confession within an hour of his arrival. As he paced up and down the room his thoughts went back to the past. He had gone out to the Cape with the sole desire of helping and keeping his brother straight. He found him just the same as ever. Pleasure seeking and careless; using any means that came in his way, whether fair or foul, of advancing his own interests; throwing his money away while it lasted, then living on his friends till more came. Duke found him at first really doing some farming, but it was done by fits and starts, and there was little profit in it. All his spare time was spent at the Corderoys, and Duke, seeing he was chiefly engaged in riding about and playing tennis with the girls, rather encouraged the intimacy than otherwise; for it kept him away from the gambling saloons. Then came the announcement of his engagement to Cora, but her father, though not absolutely forbidding it, did not approve of the match. After much persuasion he gave a reluctant consent. Duke was necessarily a good deal with his Battery, and was not

aware of all that went on. It was only afterwards that he discovered that Mark had, in the most cool and bare-faced way, allowed the Corderoys to consider him the eldest son, and consequently Mr. Corderoy overlooked his present small income, in view of his future expectations. Yet he still forbade any idea of marriage. Cora had about £200 a year of her own, the interest from a legacy left her by an aunt, and it was this paltry £200 that made Mark so anxious to marry. In the end the foolish girl consented to a secret marriage, and it was not till after she was his wife, that she learnt he was the youngest son. In bitter anger and disappointment, she left him and went home; but her father sternly shut his door upon her. It was at this juncture Duke came forward. Mark was at his last penny, and was wild to try his fortune in Australia. Cora refused to accompany him, and then Duke conceived the idea of her going home to his mother for the time, till something could be arranged. He managed to patch up the peace between husband and wife; Mark vowed he would make a fresh start in Australia; and if he succeeded he would send for his wife. And the young couple parted with one another amicably.

All this Duke wrote to his mother, imploring her to befriend Cora, and receive her as a daughter. He came home, missing intensely the motherly presence and welcome he had always received before; and Cora's reward for all his efforts on her behalf was the confession now made to him, of a long system of deception and imposition, in which she had tricked and deceived those nearest and dearest to him.

He was the soul of honour himself, and though his

brother's conduct again and again had filled him with shame and mortification, he had preserved his trust in a woman's truth and integrity. He had looked upon Cora as an ignorant, unsophisticated girl; had pitied her from the bottom of his heart for being Mark's wife; and had returned home full of ideas of helping and befriending her still. As he stood before her now, all this passed rapidly through his mind, and having a manlike hatred of scenes, he felt strongly inclined to go straight out of the room and right himself in the eyes of his father and of Olive.

But Duke was not a man of impulse, and after a little silence he said :

"I do not know that matters will be improved by the explanation being deferred; but if you are very anxious that nothing shall be said to-night by me, I will be silent. Only I warn you that this is providing circumstances do not force me to explain. I will not prevaricate, nor lie."

Then Cora looked up eagerly, and her defiance melted away.

"Thank you," she said, "I shall be able to explain to-morrow!"

"Where is Mark now?" Duke asked abruptly. "Do you hear from him?"

"Yes," said Cora hesitating; "and I am thinking of joining him soon. My place is by my husband's side, whatever his circumstances may be."

With this proper sentiment she left the room, and with an inward groan Duke went back to his father. He felt burdened and oppressed by his secret, and when Olive had left, his father found him strangely *distract* and absent.

After a time he roused himself, and listened to the many business matters that his father touched upon. When dinner time came round, a message was brought by Cora's maid to say that "Mrs. Crofton had a bad headache and would not be able to leave her room again that evening." Duke was visibly relieved, but the servants' hall was full of wonder and conjecture about it.

"'Tis not a love match," said Triggs, shaking his head from side to side. "I would have given a deal to see the meetin' between them. 'Tis a queer welcome for a wife to give her husband home from the war!"

"There's something queer altogether," said Hall, Cora's maid. "Mrs. Crofton has been shut up with the Captain, and she comes out with her eyes as red as fire, and shuts herself up into her bedroom regular sulky like, and he, poor man, looks quite sad and gloomy!"

All had a word to say, but none of them had an inkling of the truth, and Duke was not called upon in any way that night to compromise truth, or reveal the real facts of the case.

He stayed talking to his father till the old man retired to rest; then, with a cigar in his mouth, he went out and paced the glass verandah in the moonlight.

All through his late campaign and his voyage home, one image was in his thoughts. When he stepped into his father's room and saw Olive sitting by his side, his heart throbbed violently. He noted even in that brief space of time, that she had grown more beautiful. There was a grace and sweetness in her carriage that had been lacking in the merry, laughing-eyed girl that he had

known nine months previously. Her eyes were the same deep blue; her hair was in the same sunny waves over her small well-shaped head; her black dress perhaps showed off her fair complexion to a greater advantage, but it was something more than her external appearance that appealed to him. He thought of her now, as he walked up and down. "It is Undine with her soul," he muttered at last, and then a smile broke over his face that was good to see. But her reception had pained him. Was she bent upon showing him that they must never be anything more than old friends, he wondered! And then, as he thought of what she must believe, his heart was hot against his brother's wife.

"She must think I went away and forgot her. I am a married man in her estimation; no wonder my greeting startled her, and yet what restraint I put upon myself! She has gone away thinking of me still as Cora's husband. Good heavens! What a ghastly thought! What a woman to put in her place! I wonder what she thinks of me! Perhaps she never thinks of me at all. Such fickleness on my part would be beneath contempt!"

His thoughts were not pleasant ones. He felt keenly the wrong that had been done him, and was impatient to right himself in the eyes of the one who was so much to him. At last, tired out, he turned in; and sleep for the time eased both body and brain.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### FLIGHT

We mourn the guilty, while the guilt we blame.

—*Mallett.*

IT was very early the next morning, that Duke was aroused from his slumbers by the advent of Triggs, who handed him a note on a salver with a scared face.

"I beg your pardon for intruding, sir, but Hall found this on Mrs. Crofton's table this morning; and thought you would like it the first thing, for Mrs. Crofton is away, sir, and her bed hasn't been slept in!"

Triggs evidently was longing to stay whilst the note was being read; but Duke sternly bade him leave the room, and took the note from him with imperturbable gravity.

It was not a long one:

I am going away. I cannot face explanations. My weakness made me adopt the course you naturally condemn. My weakness is taking me away. Do not trouble to look for me. I am joining Mark who is in England; and I dare say we shall be crossing the Atlantic again very soon. I hope I shall never set eyes on England again. I was brought over by false representations, and you alone are to blame for the circumstances that proved so disastrous to me.

Your sister-in-law,

CORA.

Duke read this through more than once, realising the bitterness of spirit in which it was written, and then he sighed:

"Poor girl. She is heavily handicapped by nature

and circumstances. I am afraid I have felt hardly disposed towards her."

He disappointed the household by appearing at breakfast with a calm unruffled brow. Triggs, burning with curiosity, at last could contain himself no longer.

"If you please, sir, the servants are gossiping so. May I give them any information?"

"None at present," was the stern reply.

Duke had not much appetite for his breakfast, and soon left the table and went up to his father's room. There, as gently as he could, he broke the tidings to the old man. He sketched out, as he was able, an account of Mark's courtship and marriage, and the strange home-coming of the young bride. He spared her as much as possible; he tried to exonerate her from a deliberate plan of deception, but Sir Marmaduke's anger was hot and fierce against her; and he would listen to no excuse on her behalf.

"A shameless impostor! Don't call her a daughter of mine! She is a fit companion for the son whom I will disown in future. I will have nothing to do with either of them. We shall be the talk of the neighbourhood. She has hoodwinked and deceived in every direction, lie upon lie, eating my bread, partaking of my hospitality, and laughing in her sleeve at the innocence of an old man in being so easily imposed upon!"

"Did you know that Mark was in England?"

"It's another lie!" muttered Sir Marmaduke angrily.

When Duke at last left his father, he was besieged by Baker. For a moment he felt inclined to treat her as he had treated Triggs, but his heart smote him, and he called her into the library.

"Well, Baker, out with it? You have something to say."

"Oh Captain Crofton—forgive me. I must speak—for you must know it. Better the blow came on you from me, than from an outsider! It's worse than I ever imagined, but it is true as gospel, for more than one person saw them. Mrs. Crofton left this town with Mr. Mordaunt last night."

"And who is Mr. Mordaunt?" Duke asked a little haughtily.

"He is the new agent, sir; the one Mrs. Crofton put in soon after she came. They've been so thick. Please don't be angry, but I must say it; it has been the talk about for a long time past. They were seen after ten o'clock last night, at the station together. He has been living in the Court Cottage, sir, and his man has been up this morning to say he went away late last night, and he told him he wasn't coming back no more, for the billet didn't suit him. Those were his very words, sir. And he hasn't left a bit of his property or luggage behind him."

"I am afraid, Baker," said Duke adopting a stern tone to hide the sudden sinking of heart that came over him, "I am afraid your tongues here run away with you. Mrs. Crofton left this house suddenly I own, but she had her reasons for doing so. She left to join her husband, for she felt unable to give you the explanation that I must give you now."

Baker's face was a study.

"You have all been labouring under a strange mistake," Duke continued. "Mrs. Crofton is Mr. Mark's wife, and I shall be much obliged if you will make this known at once."



For a moment Baker stood stupefied, then she burst into floods of tears.

"Oh Mr. Duke—forgive me for calling you by the old name—oh, I am so happy—how could we think you could choose such a lady! It doesn't matter to us now, where she has gone, it was the thoughts of you that well nigh broke my heart!"

Duke's face softened.

"You are a silly old woman!" he said. "Now go; and for Mr. Mark's honour, contradict this miserable gossip that is going about. Mrs. Crofton may have travelled up by the same train as Mr. Mordaunt, but it can have only been a coincidence."

Baker withdrew in a tearfully happy state of mind; and her news was received in the servants' hall with amazement and delight.

Then Duke went straight down to Crofton Court Cottage; a small residence on the outskirts of one of his father's woods, which had always been occupied by the agent.

Interrogation and inspection there did not reassure him; he heard many things that he would rather not have heard, and Cora sunk lower in his estimation in consequence. He came back to the house, burdened and distressed, and had great difficulty in keeping this last misfortune from his father's ears.

But when Sir Marmaduke eventually heard that his agent had decamped, he was so anxious that his son should look into all his business affairs, that Cora's departure was forgotten. And Duke found himself overwhelmed with all that he had to do. It was not surprising, that before two or three days had passed, a

doctor was in attendance, absolutely forbidding him to touch any business matters.

Duke groaned ; as with throbbing head and confused brain, he tossed on his pillows. He had seen enough of his father's affairs to discover that his late agent had been quietly and systematically robbing him. And Cora's unfaithfulness to his brother, her apparent departure with this man, and the many facts about her close companionship with him, all seemed to bewilder and oppress him. He was impatient of his own weakness, and the express orders from his doctor that he was not to do anything, not to worry, and not to see any one, were irritating in the extreme. At the bottom of his heart, he had a longing to go straight to Olive, and right himself in her eyes. Why had she been so ready to believe it of him, so ready to pass the news round ?

Cora's scornful words rang in his ears, "She was not at all surprised, why should she be ?"

He tossed on his bed with feverish impatience, and after two or three days of enforced rest, defied the doctor and walked out of his room.

"I shall go out of my mind if you condemn me to such solitude," he said to him, as he met him on the stairs.

The doctor shook his head.

"I ought to have put you in charge of a nurse," he said with a comical twinkle in his eye. "They always obtain an authority over the patient that I cannot arrive at ! Now take a last word from me. Go out for a ride or drive, but no business, if you value your head-piece, for at least a week. I have warned Sir Marmaduke, and he has promised not to transgress again in this respect."

Duke strode out at the open door, and the soft spring air seemed to give him fresh life at once.

It was a bright sunshiny afternoon and he turned towards the stables instinctively, with the words in his heart, if not on his lips, "I will ride over to Orchard Farm. I cannot keep away from her any longer."

He had barely given orders for his horse to be brought round, when a message was given to him from Sir Marmaduke wishing to see him at once.

A shade came over his face, as he re-entered the house, yet it was gone when he opened the door of his father's room, and he greeted him with a cheerful smile.

"I heard you were out of your room," Sir Marmaduke said anxiously, "and I am not going to ask you to go through business papers with me, for Dr. Clayton has forbidden it; but I am in great trouble, and I have no one to advise me as to what I ought to do."

"Well here I am," his son said. "Two heads are better than one. What is it?"

"Your mother's pearls—the Crofton pearls I should say. They are gone, and that wretched woman is at the bottom of it."

"Not Cora? Oh I think not, father. You must be mistaken."

"I have been a fool," the old man groaned; "but my memory is not what it was. She took possession of your mother's jewels, and there was some question about Baker. I forget now the circumstances—but in any case, I took back the jewel case from her and locked it up in my cabinet here; but in doing so I discovered that the pearls were missing. That was a long time ago. She told me she had taken them to the jeweller's in

town to have the clasp repaired. I was very angry at her letting them go out of her hands, and told her they must be fetched back immediately. She promised me that she would see about it, and from that day to this I have completely forgotten the occurrence. I have asked Baker to search her room thoroughly, but she has been unsuccessful so far. The pearls are nowhere to be found."

Father and son looked at each other for a moment in silence; then Duke remarked :

"They are so valuable that they will be easy to trace. To what jeweller did Cora say she had taken them?"

"To J—— in Bond Street."

"I had better go up to town and see him at once?"

"And if you don't find them there?"

"Shall I put it into the hands of Scotland Yard?"

Again there was a silence, and Sir Marmaduke perceptibly trembled.

"My son's wife—bearing the Crofton name—we shall never hold up our heads again!"

Then Duke squared his shoulders, with fresh courage.

"Look here, father, we won't think the worst. I shall do nothing rash. Her story may be a true one. I shall go and investigate it. I will go up to town the first thing to-morrow morning; and will bring back my report to you before we resort to extreme measures. I hope the servants here haven't got wind of it."

"Baker knows; she has been here talking to me, but I told her to keep it to herself, and I think she will."

This last stroke of ill-fortune seemed to have thoroughly unnerved Sir Marmaduke. His son put off his ride, and sat in his father's room for the rest of the day,

leading his thoughts into other channels, and beguiling the time by relating some of his South African experiences.

The next day he started for town, and Sir Marmaduke anxiously and impatiently awaited the result.

It proved a fruitless journey as far as the pearls were concerned, for the jeweller had never received them ; and Duke sauntered down Bond Street with gloom and despondency stamped upon his features.

Suddenly he was confronted by Vinny who was shopping in her brougham.

"You are looking a perfect wreck," she said ; "you must come back and lunch with me. How is your father and—your wife ?"

"I have none," he returned quietly.

Vinny looked at him in consternation ; then compelled him to get into the brougham.

"Now Duke," she said, "we have grown up together like brother and sister, tell me all about it. Wild rumours have reached me already, but I won't believe them. Has Mrs. Crofton left you ?"

Duke leant back in the brougham, and gave a tired sigh.

"I am beginning to wish myself back in Africa," he said. "You have captured me, so I suppose I must do your bidding."

"Not unless it will ease your mind," said Vinny softly ; "but for 'auld lang syne,' give me a chance of doing something towards helping—or comforting you."

There was a little silence, then Duke said huskily,

"I will tell you all. God knows how I have wanted a woman's help since my return ! There is such an

awful blank without my mother, and my poor old father has but a broken reed to lean upon in me ! I feel sometimes as if my wits have left me altogether. Weakness, Clayton says it is, but it is rather unfortunate at this crisis."

In a few terse words he told her all ; even down to his fruitless errand in Bond Street that day, and Vinny listened with interest, sympathy and alertness, and with an undercurrent of intense relief that Cora was not his wife.

"It is an extraordinary story," she said ; "but I can give you one bit of information, and that is that Mark has been in London, for I saw him talking to Mrs. Crofton myself, at Paddington Station, though she denied it when I mentioned the fact to her."

"I believe she has gone to him."

Vinny was silent, then she said, "We will be charitable and hope so. Perhaps that Mr. Mordaunt was some friend of Mark's. It may have been a deeply laid plan to get money out of your father ; and when you returned, they both left and joined Mark in town. I think I can make a suggestion about the pearls. They are such valuable ones, that I believe they would soon make their way to *the* pearl connoisseur in town. I have his address. It is somewhere in the city. If you come back with me I will give it to you. You can but try there."

"Thank you. I will make one more effort, and if that fails I must go home and consult my father."

"You ought to be in bed," said Vinny looking at him scrutinisingly. "Who looks after you ? Any one ?"

"Every one," said Duke with a short laugh.

"Have you seen Diogenes and Olive yet?"

"I have seen Olive once."

Duke's tone was calmness itself; but it did not deceive Vinny.

"She is settling down to quite an ideal old maid's life at the Farm. I wish I could change places with her. We live in such a rush. Even at this empty time we always seem to be entertaining. I have a small 'at home' on this afternoon. If you will stay you will see Elsie. She is out to lunch, but she will be back in time to help me receive."

Duke declined this invitation with thanks, and would not even stay to lunch, though Vinny pressed him sorely.

"It is such a treat to see a 'Blackenbury' face again, and I think we do each other mutual good. Do not be so downcast. Mrs. Crofton is doubtless with her husband. I should say from what I saw of her that she is more weak than wicked. I felt sorry for her."

They had some further talk; and then Duke went on to the city, Vinny begging him to come to her the next time he was up in town.

"I am not a talker," she said to him with one of her slow sweet smiles. "I listen and hold my tongue. Your confidence will be held sacred. But may I ask if I may contradict the report of your marriage?"

"Most certainly. I shall be deeply grateful to you."

## CHAPTER XXV

### ELSIE'S CHOICE

Howe'er man rules in science and in art,  
The sphere of woman's glories is the heart.

—*T. Moore.*

IT was a week later. Again Vinny was entertaining her friends with music and tea; and Elsie, in radiant spirits, was the centre of attraction.

She was holding a spirited conversation with three or four of her most constant admirers, when a newcomer caused her to look up in astonishment.

"Is it your Grace?" she said, holding out her hand. "Vinny told me she had met you the other day, but she hardly hoped to see you to-day."

"I came to speak to her on business," said Duke simply, as he took a chair by her side. "I am afraid I must not expect to monopolise her society at present. I have shaken hands, and passed on. She is surrounded. Are your rooms as full as this every afternoon?"

"If you were here in the season, you might call them full, not now, I think. Are you convalescent? Vinny was longing to order you to bed the other day. She told me you were a perfect shadow. I suppose you have really been very bad?"

"I am feeling very fit again. If I may be allowed to make a personal remark in return, I never saw you look better."

"Thank you," said Elsie smiling. "I am enjoying



life at present. I am told by wise-acres that my enjoyment will not last. Even Mr. Dacre here prophesies a different fate ere long. How long do you give me?"

She turned to a dark-haired sallow man, leaning against the wall at her side. He raised his eyebrows. "One year—bliss—two—disillusions—three—bored to death!"

"And how many years have you had?" she asked him briskly.

"Oh, best not ask," he drawled. "I died a natural death long ago, but have lately come to life again."

Duke did not like the glance that accompanied these words. But Elsie sparkled still with animation.

"Your resurrection is a very slow process," she said.

"Slow and sure," was his retort.

"I am told," Elsie said turning to Duke; "that your face soon dates your number of seasons in town. I look at mine every morning to see if I can see a sign of the orthodox expression that comes with experience. It is supposed to express: 'I am the best dressed here, I can't help it. I confer you a favour by my presence, I can't help it. I am altogether superior to my surroundings, I can't help it. I am unutterably bored, I can't help it.' At present, your Grace, I am a novice. As Mr. Dacre puts it, it is my year of 'bliss.'"

Then she rose from her seat, and invited Duke in winning tones to come and see the fernery.

"You are changed," he said, as he walked by her side.

"For the better, I presume. Don't be like Diogenes and shake your head over me! Isn't it possible to be always happy in this world?"

There was a little wistfulness in her tone.

"Yes," Duke replied, and a light came into his eyes as he spoke. "It ought to be an expanding happiness with an expanding growth."

"I think I have expanded since I left home," Elsie said serenely.

"There is something radically wrong in any life," said Duke warmly, "that deteriorates. A life is meant to get fuller, not emptier as time passes by. We never cease growing; and for happiness and freshness to be the monopoly of youth and inexperience, is wrong and absurd."

"I am glad I have one advocate on my side," said Elsie; "I watch and take note of a good deal. And I think it is fashionable to assume a fatigue and indifference to everything and everybody. It is a fashion I will not follow."

"It is well to get our life's supplies through a source outside our circumstances," went on Duke, "for we sometimes get hemmed in by them, and our sphere is narrowed uncomfortably."

"Now you are talking like Diogenes. Have you seen him?"

"Not yet."

"They are a quaint household," said Elsie. "I cannot think how Olive can be so content—three antiquated ignorant rustics, and an imp of mischief dancing round! She and Diogenes are completely shut up to each other's society. Yet she looks as happy as ever. Such a little contents her. She always used to say, I remember, that good health and a good digestion were what constituted happiness."

"Yet she was so fond of your home. It must have been a trial leaving it."

"Yes, I suppose it was, but Olive takes everything very philosophically. And I think she has become good now."

Elsie added this last assertion with a grimace of disgust.

"That is a misfortune indeed," observed Duke drily.

"Well, I don't know for certain! She wrote me an ecstatic letter last spring after I left home. I told her I couldn't understand a word of it, and asked her not to repeat it. She has not, but Vinny stayed a week with her lately, and came back very depressed. I asked her why she was so dull, and she said she wished she could get her life adjusted rightly as Olive had. I think those were the words,—'adjusted rightly.' Well, my life is that at present."

"Seen from your mirror, I suppose it is."

"What other mirror should I use?"

They were standing in the fernery, opposite a window which was partly open, and Duke, without a word, raised his hand to the sky above, which, early though it was, seemed alight with innumerable shining stars.

Elsie shrugged her shoulders and led the way back to the drawing-room.

A little later, and Duke was able to get speech with Vinny.

"I come with good news," he said. "I have found them."

Vinny was delighted. "Oh do tell me. I am longing to hear. Wait till this good lady takes her departure, and then I shall be free. We will come into the library, for we shall be undisturbed."

"It is you who set me on the right track," Duke said as soon as they were alone. "I went to your man, and he said he would make inquiries amongst several firms he was in the habit of dealing with. He sent me a wire this morning, and I came up. I discovered the pearls, and the particulars of their appearance. I am telling you this in deepest confidence. Mark himself took them to the firm requesting a loan on them. He did not conceal his identity, for our pearls are, as you know, famous. He said since our mother's death they had become the property of his wife, and he wished to raise a temporary loan, which was accordingly given."

"Oh I am so thankful. And you are taking them home?"

"No," said Duke gravely. "I am not in a position to redeem them at present. It will be a matter of time, but I have left them in safe hands. I am afraid Mark is at the bottom of a good deal more than I imagined."

"Yes," said Vinny thoughtfully. "And his wife was his tool. I pity her from the bottom of my heart!"

Duke paced the room, then he turned round with fire in his eyes.

"He has dragged our honour in the dust, the Crofton name is besmirched with dishonesty and fraud. Do you think I should ever have the right to ask a woman to share such a name?"

"I should leave that question with the woman," Vinny said gravely. "I always think it very unfair not to lay such a matter frankly before her."

"But it would place her so awkwardly."

"I don't see it. A woman has no difficulty in giving an answer at such a time. You are not responsible for

your brother's faults. And it is morbid to fancy you ought to suffer all your life, and perhaps make another suffer too, for his wrong-doing."

Duke relapsed into silence. He seemed to forget where he was, and sat like a man in a dream, his thoughts far away from his surroundings.

Vinny watched him smiling, and presently she said, "Well what do you think of Elsie?"

"Oh," he said rousing himself with an effort, "I think she is a different being. And yet if I may say it, I think I prefer the quiet sleepy Elsie of old."

"You mustn't tell Elsie that. She has the greatest contempt for herself, as she was a year ago."

"Is she living with you altogether?"

"For the present. My husband has become accustomed to her and likes her. She has brought a bright young atmosphere into the house. I should miss her very much if she were to leave us."

"You must expect that one day."

"I suppose so."

Then Duke rose, and took his leave, and Vinny, with a little tired sigh, went back to the drawing-room.

She found Elsie alone with a young fellow, Cyril Delamere by name, and upon her entrance Elsie rose, confused and blushing, from her seat.

Cyril stepped quickly forward. He was a tall, handsome young barrister, more popular in society than in his profession, and he had been a constant visitor at the house for the past few months. Vinny had been a little anxious about his evident admiration for her young sister. She knew his family expected him to marry well, and though of a good old county family themselves, they

were forced to think more of money than of birth. Two of their daughters had married wealthy city men. There were three others still unmarried, and Cyril was the only son. She had cautioned Elsie as gently as she dared against him, as she had felt that Cyril was too much a man of the world to mean anything serious.

Now as he came to meet her, she knew that she had been mistaken.

"Mrs. Stanton, will you welcome me as a brother-in-law? Your sister has listened to me at last."

Vinny tried to throw warmth into her congratulations, but she was too taken aback to say much, and Elsie came to her rescue.

"Never mind, Vinny. It is a surprise, isn't it? But Cyril and I know we shall have your good wishes."

Elsie looked flushed and radiant, and Vinny could only kiss her, murmuring:

"Indeed I hope you will be happy together."

But late that evening, she had a talk with Cyril alone, and asked him if his parents had any knowledge of the step he was taking.

"You are not either of you wealthy," she said with a little smile; "but I suppose it is too late for me to make any objections. As I stand in a mother's stead to Elsie, may I ask what your prospects are?"

Cyril treated the matter lightly. He told her he was a free agent, and had enough means of his own to support a wife.

"We shall not set up an establishment in Grosvenor Square, but Elsie is not ambitious, and is content with what I can give her. My parents will be told at once. I could hardly tell them before I had spoken to your

sister. I was not quite so presuming as to forestall her answer, for I know I haven't much to recommend me beyond a fair share of brains. I am hoping to rise in my profession, and shall be a Q.C. by-and-by. I shall go home to-morrow, and then I hope, as my mother is an invalid, your sister will be kind enough to go and stay with her for a few days."

Elsie's fate seemed settled, and Vinny wisely made the best of it. She wrote a long letter to Olive, and Elsie did the same, which letters were naturally a great surprise.

Life at the Farm had gone on very quietly for the last week or two, and then one day Baker appeared with her astounding news.

Olive listened with intense quietness to the account of Cora's identity being discovered; but after Baker had gone, she put on her hat and set off along the country roads, to get away from everybody. After the long struggle, the news stunned and bewildered her. She could hardly take it in; and her first feeling was one of wonder why she had been allowed to suffer so. She walked on rapidly, not heeding the gathering dusk, for her heart was in a tumult. At last, coming to an old stone bridge, it took her back in thought to that spring morning so long ago in Blackenbury, and leaning her head against it she burst into a passion of tears. They did her good. Her thoughts and feelings had been so restrained by her indomitable pride, that it now seemed the greatest relief to her to let them run on unchecked. At last she murmured, "It is no longer sin to think of him."

And then with an effort she pulled herself together,

and with tearful happy eyes retraced her steps homewards through the gloom. A fancy took her when she reached the Farm, to go out into the old walled kitchen garden. It was there that she had wrestled in the first agony of her trouble; it was there that she had received the grace and strength to carry her burden with resignation and cheerfulness.

The garden lay in silence; the fruit trees on the wall extended their snow-white blossoms along it, lightening the dark shadows, and refreshing the evening air with their fragrant scent. It was a still sweet time, when the birds' voices were hushed in sleep, and the dew wrapped the plants and flowers in its soft reviving embrace. Olive walked there with a glow in her heart that glorified her surroundings. She lifted up her small proud head with a gesture of freedom and relief. As she gazed up into the infinite blue, studded with shining stars, she seemed to have a fresh realisation of her insignificance, and of the wonderful protecting love of her Creator. The words came to her:

“Lo these are parts of His ways, but how little a portion is heard of Him.”



## CHAPTER XXVI

### A DISAPPOINTMENT

Be patient ! Time will reinstate  
Thy health and fortunes.—*Longfellow.*

ELSIE's engagement was a great source of interest to Olive at this time. She was talking over it with Osmond, when he said :

" His Grace seems going about town. They have mentioned him once or twice. I wonder he hasn't been over to see us. We are such old friends."

The same thought had struck Olive, only she could not have put it into words. No one but herself, knew how, as every morning dawned, she said in her heart, " He may come to-day." She was still hoping and waiting, and knew from Osmond's tone that he was feeling a little hurt about it.

" He has been very busy," she suggested.

" Not too busy to attend one of Vinny's afternoon gatherings."

" He may have had business in town. Besides we must remember he is not really well yet. Baker told me the doctor is very anxious that he should not overdo it."

" I should think a quiet ride over here would be less fatiguing than knocking about town."

" He hasn't forgotten you, Diogenes. Think of what he must have to do, and all that has happened at the Court. Cora disappearing, and the agent, and all Sir

Marmaduke's business affairs in the most hopeless condition. I can picture it so well, and Sir Marmaduke's own helplessness makes him very fidgetty and exacting."

Osmond gave a grunt.

"Out of sight, out of mind!" he said. "We are buried alive here."

Then Olive laughed merrily.

"I am so delighted when you are human like the rest of us, Diogenes. Do go on. It does me good to hear you growl."

Osmond smiled in spite of himself.

"Well, I did think we should come first," he said.

"My self-importance has received a blow."

Olive was puzzled, but not distressed. It was such an intense relief to realise that his life was not tied to Cora's, that for his sake alone she could not but rejoice.

"If I never see him again I shall be glad," she said softly to herself.

And she went about her daily duties singing like a bird. The shadow, if there was any at this time, was from the war news day by day, and a little anxiety on Elsie's account. A letter came from her giving Olive rather a ludicrous description of her fiancé's home and family, with whom she had been staying, but which description was more amusing than kind. She seemed to be as radiant and self-confident as usual, but Olive began to wonder whether her present life was not hardening some of her more tender characteristics.

She began musing over the different circumstances in which she and her younger sister had been respectively placed. Elsie had had a year of sunny prosperity, with no cares or responsibilities, crowned at last by the love

of one who was dear to her. As Olive read her letter she winced a little at the easy and assured way in which Elsie laid down her future ; the certainty that her plans and purposes would be fulfilled.

"You ask me to tell you more about Cyril," she wrote. "I am not going to gush over him ! He makes my life at present, and I make his. Vinny views matrimony with gloomy eyes ; I have no fears for our future. We shall not be in a hurry to settle down as married folks for a long time yet. His people, as I have told you, shake their heads over us. They tried to make me see the harm I was doing him by tying him to an almost portionless woman, but I loftily ignored their hints and efforts in that direction. Some one told me the other day that I was surrendering my liberty too soon. I told them I should never surrender it. A married woman can be far more independent than a single one. Then a little old lady was shocked. 'My dear,' she said ; 'wives ought never to be independent of their husbands. They are the weaker sex !' But much as I think of Cyril's good qualities, I cannot echo that. I am his equal I consider in most things ; his superior in some. And he knows that when we row in the same boat I shall do as much pulling as he."

This and more in the same style made Olive look grave as she read it ; but she presently laughed at her fears.

"I am getting a dull commonplace woman," she said to herself with a little laugh. "I feel ten years older than this time last year. How much has happened in it ! Elsie thinks I am vegetating. Perhaps I am, but I would not exchange places with her. She is getting

younger in spirit, I am getting older. And we shall drift further and further apart. Yet I remember the days when I chafed against her stolid sleepy moods, and longed to quicken her into life. That has been done by other means than mine. But I wonder when trouble or care comes to her how she will bear it!"

She said something of this sort to Osmond, adding, "I cannot help feeling a little anxious about her. She would laugh at me, I expect, but I do hope he is a nice man and will make a good husband; not one of these town men who love nothing but gay society."

"I don't think Elsie would marry a man without brains," Osmond said slowly.

"They are not all brainless, but look at Vinny's marriage. It is not a happy one."

"No, I suppose not. Yet Vinny has a difficult nature. It is one that will always be craving for things beyond its reach."

"Always?"

"I know one thing that might satisfy it."

"Ah yes, and it would. Dear Vinny! she is so affectionate, so sweet, I long that her life should be brighter. But I can't help fearing about Elsie. I think her present life is almost intoxicating to her. I should be afraid of her acting rashly, without sufficient reflection."

"Does a woman reflect much when she falls in love?"

Olive laughed. "Perhaps she doesn't. But in Elsie's present mood she would see every one through rose-coloured spectacles. I feel from Vinny's letter to me that she is a little anxious over it."

"Elsie will have to buy her experience," said Osmond.

"Spoken like Diogenes!"

And Olive changed the subject.

The very next afternoon Olive took Ida with her to visit an old farmer who was sick. He lived on the outskirts of the village, so she told Osmond not to expect her back to tea, as his wife would be sure to ask her to stay with them.

Half an hour after she had started Duke arrived on horseback. He looked very disappointed when he heard from Miss March that Olive was absent, but went into the sitting-room and Osmond greeted him with eager delight.

The two had much to say to one another, and Duke, like many others, found himself confiding frankly and freely in Osmond all his difficulties since his return.

"Did you think I was never coming over to see you?" he said presently.

"Yes, honestly, I thought we were too far off for you to trouble about us."

"You have never been out of my thoughts," said Duke a little dreamily, as he gazed round the room.

Osmond's eyes twinkled. He knew that he, individually, was not comprised in that pronoun.

"You have been up in town a good bit, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, over business matters. I shall be settling down for good and all soon. Do you know my father wants me to give up the service? Of course I could not do it till this war is over. I may be sent out again soon, but it's just a question of time. It's rather a pull doing it, but he is too feeble and old to be left alone any

more, so I must make the best of it. I dread sinking down to the life of an idle country gentleman; it is such a narrow sphere."

"I don't see that. What would you say to mine?"

"Ah you! You are a marvel!"

"Indeed? Oh you little know the passionate longing that comes across me sometimes to be up and doing, instead of lying here like a helpless log. How I should glory in doing and daring, in breasting the battle of life, and earning my own livelihood, and in mixing with my fellow-creatures and my own sex particularly! In my black moments I think of the irony of my fate. I am leading a woman's life at present. Except the good farmer here, who keeps me from being too dogmatic in my opinions, I have no one to rub my wits against. No one to save me from being the most egotistical and self-opinionated philosopher as I am dubbed."

"You feel yourself superior to your surroundings?"

Osmond smiled.

"It is long since I've had any one to take me down a peg or two—it's quite refreshing. No, I am inferior in most ways, I own it! Now let me have an account of your dreadful time in Ladysmith. How I wish Olive were here! We have so often wondered about your life out there!"

"Will she not be in soon?"

"I am afraid not, but you are not in a hurry, you will stay?"

"Thanks. Wish I could, but my father is in a fidg-etty state this last week; he frets if I am away long. I promised him to return soon. I will come over again as soon as I can."

"You're not looking very fit yet."

"I'm ashamed of myself. And at times I would give the world to be out at the Front again. I am physically well again, and yet I assure you I find myself trembling like a girl if I overdo it! The fever took such a hold on me that I do not seem able—even now—to throw off the effects of it. And I can tell you, old fellow, that for lowering the spirits and setting your nerves on edge and making you generally good for nothing, give me four months in a besieged town, being bombarded almost daily. One can laugh at it now, but I was sitting down to lunch one day with four other fellows, all my seniors in the service, and men with bull-dog courage and of iron nerves, when the servant dropped a dish entering the room. In a moment all five of us leapt to our feet. The Colonel flung himself flat on the floor, and when we found it was a dish and not a shell I can tell you we looked pretty foolish! Short rations, and the sickening suspense and monotony of life, all combined to take the heart out of one!"

"I have never realised the horrors of war so much as when reading the papers this winter."

"It is best not talked about, and if you had seen what I did before we were shut into Ladysmith you would realise it ten times more. The first engagement with men who have never been in action before is almost pitiful. They go so gaily and unconcernedly into it, exactly as they take a field day at home. Then, as one by one drops, their astonishment and surprise deepen into nervousness and consternation. They begin to realise it is not a game, and then the boyish faces set themselves in grim hard lines, and they advance, receiving their first

baptism of fire, with mingled feelings of horror and pluck. The most timid cheer the loudest, they dash on breathlessly and recklessly, afraid to trust themselves to look at their falling comrades. It is only experience that will teach them to take cover cautiously. Dash is easier than caution when their hearts are thumping so loudly."

"Poor chaps! Do you think danger and death round them sobers the careless ones?"

"A great many of them. It brings life and death before them as it would never be brought to them at home in times of peace."

There was a little silence, then Duke said :

"Now tell me about yourselves from the very beginning. I left you in very different circumstances a year ago. Have you been here the whole time without a change? Does Olive like it?"

"I think she would be happy anywhere," Osmond said smiling. "You would think to see her that she had been born and bred in a farm-house."

He went on giving details of their life during the past year; and in hearing about the one so much in his thoughts Duke was interested and comforted.

When he rose to go he promised to come over again as soon as he could. Outside in the passage he was stopped by Miss March, who, from the time she had announced his name to Osmond and realised that he was an officer, had been vainly trying to suppress her excited feelings. She came forward in much the same manner as when Eddie had been taking his departure, with profuse apologies for her presumption in addressing him.

"It is indeed a liberty, sir, but knowing your rank in



the army, and having the look of ill-health and hard usage on your face, I have come to the conclusion that you may possibly have been out at the war."

Duke smiled, and in his pleasant way responded :

"Your conclusion is correct. I have been so unfortunate as to get wounded, and have been invalided home. But I feel at present rather a fraud, as if I ought to take my passage back to-morrow !"

"Oh sir," exclaimed Miss March with enthusiasm ; "may I say God bless you and reward you for your courage, and your agonising pains in undertaking for your Queen and your countrymen ! Oh sir, I lie awake with bleeding heart for the sufferings of our soldiers. I could with ease and gladness go down on my knees and humbly thank you for doing and daring in this great British Cause. I am only a very humble unit of the Empire, but I make bold to say that I express the feelings of one and all, from the least unto the greatest, when I say that my heart is full of overflowing gratitude for the sacrificing of health and strength and life, with such cheerful readiness by our brave defenders, for us and our English homes !"

She stood bowing before him, squeezing her hands tightly in front of her, and tears slowly dropping down her cheeks. Duke was quite touched.

"I can tell you," he said, "that it is the assurance of such sympathy as yours, and of many others, that makes our soldiers strong and brave in battle, and brings balm and comfort to many a suffering one. The prayers and loving sympathy of those at home are powerful influences over the morals of our troops at the Front."

Then giving her a handshake, he strode away, and

Miss March retired to her room overcome with her excitement, and quite convinced, as she said to her sister-in-law afterwards, that for "gentlemanly behaviour and sweet courteous words and bearing no one in this wide world could come near a military officer!"

Duke rode away revolving many things in his mind. He had set his heart upon seeing Olive, and felt the disappointment keenly. He wondered if time and absence had altered her feelings, whether now that she knew he was a free man, that his love had never swerved and that she was still the one woman in the world for him, she would receive him differently. But when he reached home he bravely tried to put such thoughts aside. There were many duties there that claimed his attention. Sir Marmaduke had borne the loss of the pearls with wonderful equanimity. He even made excuses for his daughter-in-law.

"I did give them to her. It was Mark who could not resist the temptation of raising money on them," he said.

And then one day the mystery of the agent was solved. The following letter was received by Duke:

S. S. *Lucinda*.

DEAR DUKE,

I am taking pity on your bewildered state, and as my wife and self are sailing over the blue ocean in quest of a wider life than we found existing at the Court, I will shed light on what may seem a little perplexing to the good folks in Blackenbury. The prodigal son returned home. To prove his penitence he made himself as one of his father's hired servants. He received enough wages to feed and clothe himself, and by diligent and ingenious use of the opportunities that came his way, he gathered together sufficient to start life afresh. Now he is setting out for that purpose. Give my kind respects to the governor, and tell him the prodigal was too much in awe of his keen

sight to venture into his presence. Cora sends love. She did not play her cards badly, and we'll steady down into a virtuous wife and husband before long.

Your hopeful brother,

MARK *alias* "MORDAUNT."

Duke read and re-read this characteristic epistle with mingled feelings of shame and relief. Shame—that his brother could have resorted to such trickery, relief—that Cora's character had been redeemed from such charges as had been made.

He sat with his head bowed in his hands. He dreaded to tell his father; he shrank from publishing his brother's fraud; and yet, as an honourable man, he could do nothing less, as Cora had been so implicated in it all.

And then with steady step, but with a heavy heart, he entered his father's room.

It was a difficult task to perform. The coolness and heartlessness of the letter made it impossible for him to read it aloud. Old Sir Marmaduke saw from his face directly he entered, that something had disturbed him. His keen eyes were quick to note any change of expression on the face of his favourite son.

"Well," he said, "any more bad news for me?"

"I don't know if you will think it so," replied Duke; "it explains a great deal that has puzzled us, and will make you judge Cora more leniently. I won't beat about the bush. I have heard from Mark. Cora and he are crossing over to America together. He confesses to me that he has done you a great wrong, for he came here in disguise and took your former agent's place. In plain words, Mr. Mordaunt and he were one."

Sir Marmaduke turned a stony stare upon his son.

"I don't believe it," he said at last. "Mordaunt was a dark, black-bearded man, and Mark is fair. The servants would have known him."

"He was disguised. As far as I can make out he hardly ever came up to the house. Cora was the only one who had much communication with him. I am afraid it is only too true. I don't know if it will be any comfort to you to feel that it is a son, and not a stranger, who has been making such a mess of your affairs. It was cleverly planned and carried out. I told you he had to clear out at the Cape. He owed a lot of money and hadn't a penny in his pocket. He must have followed his wife home almost immediately, instead of going to Australia as he had formerly determined."

Sir Marmaduke could not speak, and then at last his father's heart seemed to overflow, and instead of indignation and fury against the son who had so wronged him, came the cry :

"Oh Mark, my son ! I would have forgiven you and received you ! A son and an outcast, what would your mother have said !"

A great sob rose in the old man's throat, and Duke slipped out of the room, for he felt his father would face this trouble best alone.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS

Now with that look in your face,  
With the sunlight aslant on your cheek,  
Will you understand, while I hold your hand,  
And, oh dearest maid, let me speak?

—*Alice E. Gillington.*

"GUESS who has been here, Olly?" said Osmond, when Olive returned with her little charge to the farm.

"Duke," said Olive quietly.

"Right. He could not stay. He was disappointed not to see you. He looks very ill and worn, and so thin. He says he is very much tied to Sir Marmaduke at present or he would have been over before."

"Is he another strange gempleum?" demanded Ida.

"Not strange to us, dear. He has been fighting out in Africa and got wounded. Did he tell you how he got wounded, Diogenes?"

"I declare I never asked him! He never talks much of himself, and only touched on the horrors of the war."

"I have just got a letter from Dot. I passed the post-office so called in, and they gave it to me. She wants me to go to dine with them next week."

Leaning against the window Olive took the letter out of her pocket.

"She mentions that Duke has decided for the present to take the agent's place, and look after his father's property himself. Did he tell you about it?"

"Yes."

"This is what she says: 'Father says that it will be years before the mischief done to the property can be remedied. Duke goes about with a kind of stolid determination in his face. I think he will leave no stone unturned till he gets everything in spick and span order again. He came over to dine with us the other night. I thought him much graver and sterner than he used to be. But I think he has gone through an awful time. Isn't it strange that Mark and he should be brothers!' Then she goes on to give me an account of some Blackenbury gaieties. I am afraid I must decline her invitation to dine."

"Wherefore?"

"I shall be very busy next week—Mr. and Mrs. Hunt return, and I shall have to hand over parish matters and 'render an account of my stewardship.' Dot always expects me to sleep the night and stay the greater part of the next day with her, so a dinner at the Manor means the best part of two days."

"When I go home again," remarked Ida at this juncture, "I mean to be a useful person, and Beautiful does too. We shall help father with his sermons and tell him what to say, and we shall tidy mother's writing drawer every day. We have done with wickedness forever and ever!"

Her small face was so solemn that Olive did not laugh, but she recognised the borrowed sentence.

"That is, I am afraid, impossible for us, Ida," she said. "Farmer Sparks said he had done with wickedness forever and ever, because he feels he is a dying man, waiting outside Heaven's gate to be let in."

"I hope God won't keep him long outside," said Ida, "he's too ill a man to be kept waiting."

Then, with a quick change of thought, she danced out of the room dragging Beautiful after her.

Olive fingered a bowl of daffodils on the window ledge lovingly; she looked into the garden which was full of her favourite golden flower, and a dreamy smile played about her lips. She had at first been very disappointed to have missed Duke.

"It seems as if fate is against me," she mused; "and yet it must be all right. I have waited too long to be impatient now."

Then, with a sigh and a smile, she left the room and went in search of Ida.

She was quietly happy these bright spring days; the shadows in her life seemed to have passed, and hope for the future was stealing into her heart with a subtle fragrance that was all the sweeter for its non-recognition.

Only two days after Duke's visit, on a sunny afternoon, as she was picking up a fallen spray of apple blossom in the orchard, a voice startled her.

"Good-afternoon. We are almost strangers."

She turned and confronted Duke.

"Yes," she said quietly, giving him her hand, "I was sorry to miss you when you came over."

"I am fortunate to-day."

"How is Sir Marmaduke?"

"Wonderfully well; and much brighter than he has been for a long while."

They were commonplace remarks, but they served to quiet and steady the pulses that were hammering and

beating in both hearts. Olive stood with her back to a tree, the pink and white blossoms of which seemed to frame her slender figure in grey with a spring-like radiance and warmth. She was bareheaded, and the yellow sunshine touched with gold her soft brown hair. Daffodils were in her belt, and they took Duke back to that spring morning a year ago when he had spoken to her by the old stone bridge.

His eyes were on her now, but hers were away over the distant valley in front of her. She was not so ready of speech as she used to be, and there was an abrupt pause in their conversation. Duke felt nervous. He was convinced that this would be his last appeal, and the thought of being sent back to his lonely home without his heart's desire, made him chary of hastening such a possible fate in store for him.

"You have heard," he began rather lamely, "of all that has happened. It has been a terrible home-coming to me."

Some faint instinct prompted these words. He remembered the saying, "Pity is akin to love," and when she turned her eyes full upon him he caught his breath.

"Yes, I have heard everything, and I have felt so sorry for you."

Then the hot blood rushed through his veins. Prudence was cast to the winds.

"Olive, I want you still."

Plain, honest words, but they were backed up with all the passionate love of a strong man's heart. She stood motionless for a moment, then made a step forward, and the softly-breathed words were only heard by his quick ear, as he took her into his arms :



"I have learnt to want you too!"

The sun shone on, the birds carolled forth their songs of hope and gladness, the soft spring breeze kissed the waking flowers, and all of it together was a faint picture of the two happy hearts under that old apple tree.

In the farm-house sitting-room, the fair-haired child was sitting on a low stool with her doll, drinking in eagerly a wonderful story from the lips of Osmond.

"And when the Prince found the Princess what did he do?"

"He knelt at her feet, and all his troubles and past difficulties seemed to melt away when he saw her sweet kind eyes looking upon him."

"And then what?"

"Then they came stepping through the forest hand in hand, and the sun and the birds and the flowers all danced and quivered with joy."

Ida looked out of the window thoughtfully.

"Just like Miss Tracy is coming up the garden with a gempleum. Who is he, Uncle Humbug? Why didn't you ask him to come in? Why did you send him out to the orchard?"

Osmond bent forward and glanced out of the window, then leant back on his cushions and smiled.

"The Prince," he said quietly. "He has found the Princess at last."

The Marches were having their tea, and Bess March's tongue was very busy.

"I see more things than those folk who don't exercise their brains by getting information of the world they live in by the means of papers and books! And from being a Londoner myself I have had opportunities with-

out ceasin' of observin' human nature. And I say again, Miss Tracy came to us in a black dress, and with heavy trouble on her head, but when time wore off the edge of it, she had a trouble in her heart that no woman likes to speak of. I'm talkin' of what a woman of my experience and life knows about!"

"Ay," interrupted Andrew with his eyes twinkling all over, "Us knows 'ee have had many a heart-break, Bess. The lads be terrible back'erd in gatherin' of such a blossom, but 'tis never too late to mend, and they'll be mendin' their ways and some un's heart as well, one o' these days!"

Bess ignored this thrust with an indignant sniff. "I'm talkin' of a young lady whose mind and ways can better be understood by a person of eddication and culture, than by one whose brain is filled with pigs and fattenin' poultry. And I say that though I did hope the right gentleman had come the end o' last summer, I see after a time the burden was still on the heart. And now I make bold to say that Mr. Tracy's friend, the courteous military officer, that come two days ago, and was so low at the absence, and has come back again with a light sparklin' in his eye, has not come to-day to sit with his friend, but is out on his errand like a true knight of old, and the orchard to-day will be a scene of joy and peace in the over-burdened heart."

"Deary me!" remarked Mrs. March admiringly. "You do speak all the world like a story book, Bess. But your fancies are always runnin' on such things. Now I would be right glad for Miss to be woo'd and married, but I ain't in a hurry to part with her. And the quality don't mate so well as in our station. Mrs.

Stanton now, when she comes down, she looks with her sad pretty eyes at me, and she says,—‘ Ah, Mrs. March, if I were only a single woman again ! ’ And though she laughs a minute after, and says she didn’t mean it, I knows better. I’d like Miss to get a right good husband, but these strangers that come, well, we don’t know enough of them to judge. And maybe, this gent likes a sunny orchard better than an indoor room. He may go as he come, and none o’ us be the wiser.”

“ He has been in that orchard nigh on a hour and a half,” snapped Bess decisively, as her keen eyes glanced up at the old clock in the corner, “ and if that’s a usual kind o’ visit, without nothin’ to come from it, well my name ain’t Bess March ! ’Tis fittin’ such a brave officer, wounded in battlefields, and havin’ returned home with disease rife in his body, and yet none too proud to give a smile and a handshake to them that values such, should meet with his deservin’ reward, and Miss Tracy havin’ lived through his absence with a bright brave spirit, will be crowned at last, and my blessing shall be given spontaneously upon the happy pair ! ”

It was not surprising, with these conversations going on indoors, that Olive had no difficulty in breaking her news to those most interested. Duke stayed to tea, and then had to go, but said he would be over the next day to bring Olive to his father.

For the rest of that evening Olive was very quiet. Her heart was too full to talk, and when Ida was fast asleep, she slipped out with a shawl over her head, for one of her favourite dusky rambles round the old walled garden.

Trouble, great trouble, had come to her in this quiet

spot, and now joy had followed. She lifted up her heart in thankful gratitude for this gift of a good man's love, and as she looked back at every step she had taken in the past year she would but repeat to herself with tearful eyes : " Surely goodness and mercy have followed me."

Duke called for her in his dog-cart the next morning, for she was to go to lunch and return in the afternoon. They had much to say to each other on that drive, much to tell and explain.

" This has been a long year to both of us," Duke said presently ; " there have been so many changes in it."

" Yes," assented Olive, " but changes are good for one sometimes."

" They are, and the unexpected brings joy as well as sorrow."

" Now you are talking platitudes," said Olive with her old merry laugh. " I have a good deal of that from Diogenes, but I don't expect it from you."

" What do you expect ? "

" Something strong and fresh and breezy."

Duke smiled as he looked down upon her.

" I should say the freshness and breeziness are your characteristics ! I suppose unconsciously my difficult circumstances since my return from Africa have depressed me. And yet I have been thankful for all the work that has come upon me, for my mother's empty place is always before me. It is too fresh a sore to be healed, and one is better doing than thinking at such times. Still it has not added to my cheerfulness."

" You do not look crushed and broken spirited," said Olive smiling.

"No," he said, lifting his head erect, "I feel at this moment I could face the biggest evil out, with you at my side. I don't think I shall have a despondent moment again."

There was suppressed elation visible on faithful old Triggs' face as Olive stepped into the hall. She went straight to Sir Marmaduke who was expecting her.

His welcome brought the tears to her eyes.

"This is a happy day for me," he said brokenly as he took both her hands in his. "I think good times are in store for the lonely old man. My dear wife and I have long coveted you for a daughter. May you be as great a comfort to my boy, my dear, as you have been to me!"

"There is no other place that seems so much like home to me as this," said Olive softly.

"It is like a nightmare to me," the old man went on; "I welcomed the one I thought was Duke's wife as best I could in the bitterness and soreness of my spirit. I gave up then all hope for a happy old age, and only wished to die. And then trouble upon trouble, anxiety and mystery. Now—my son back, and the daughter of my choice coming to be our comfort after all!"

"And now we will have luncheon," broke in Duke's clear, brisk voice, as he saw how near to a breakdown his father was.

Talk flowed into lighter channels after that, but before Olive left that afternoon Sir Marmaduke asked plaintively:

"And when are you going to marry him, my dear?"

Olive could not reply. Duke answered for her.

"I am ready to-morrow," he said.

"You won't keep us waiting long?" the old man pleaded.

Olive placed her hand on Duke's arm whilst a pink flush rose to her cheeks.

"Not longer than I can help," she said.

Duke insisted on driving her back.

"I have a fresh horse," he said; "and the weather is so bright and warm that it will not hurt you."

They stood together at the front door a little later, waiting for the trap to come round. Duke hardly ever took his gaze off Olive, and when she, looking away over the old terraced garden, said gently: "It is a fair scene, is it not?" he replied, "I know a fairer."

Drawing her to him, he went on a little brokenly: "I wonder if you will ever know how dear you are to me. I can hardly realise all the days of waiting and hoping are over. We have both been through a good deal this last year. I shall be impatient, Olive, for the time when we stand on this threshold as man and wife."

Olive could not speak. Her eyes were full of happy tears. Duke stooped and kissed her.

"We're rather a silent couple," he said with a little laugh; "but there is no need for words when there is perfect understanding."

Olive looked up at him with a smile, "I am the silent one," she said. "It seems so new, so strange, that I cannot express my feelings. We shall have time for that, Duke, by-and-by!"

"Olive," said Duke during the drive, as they were nearing the village of Egerton Cross, "I have been wondering whether you have not gained something this

year—something that baffles my description, but it is in your voice, your eyes, your soul.”

For a moment she did not reply, then she looked up, and her clear eyes glowed with deep feeling.

“I have had my life adjusted rightly,” she said. “It was what you advised me to do before you left home last year.”

He drew a deep breath of thankfulness.

“It is the one thing I longed for,” he said; “the one thing I never forgot to pray for, out in Africa. My love could not give it to you, much as I desired it.”

“But perhaps your prayers did,” said Olive.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### LINKED TOGETHER

The world has little to bestow  
Where two fond hearts in equal love are joined.

THE month of May was to Olive like a bright ray of sunshine after a sullen storm. And many besides herself looked up and took heart. Lord Roberts' triumphal progress, the relief of Mafeking, the fall of the Free State capital, and the change in the whole situation, brought hope to many an anxious heart. Eddie wrote home in good spirits, though chafing at the inactivity of Buller's troops in Natal. When at length they began to move forward he was satisfied, but his sisters watched the casualty lists anxiously.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early June, and Olive's wedding-day. There had been great discussions as to where the ceremony was to take place. Vinny offered her house in town, and Elsie said it would be impossible to have it anywhere else, but this did not meet Olive's views. Both she and Duke were quite agreed that as far as their wishes went, they would like it as quiet as possible. And they finally decided to be married from Orchard Farm.

The Marches were proud of the honour done them, and for weeks Miss March was scouring, cleaning, white-washing and papering; turning out every odd corner and cupboard; and finally resting from her labours with the



satisfied conviction that a "Duke's house couldn't be cleaner!"

Mrs. Hunt was anxious to have a bountiful spread at the Rectory after the service, but Olive assured her that Mrs. March's hospitable soul would be sorely disappointed if she were not allowed that honour; and so under the superintendence of Vinny, who arrived a few days beforehand, a very pretty little repast was laid out in the old kitchen, which was decorated with masses of roses and flowers of every description. Miss March invested in a few dozen of penny Union Jacks, which she insisted upon placing up the walls. Her final effort brought a smile to Vinny's lips. It was a red banner with elaborate gilt letters upon it: "See the conquering hero comes!" This was tacked up over the fire-place and edged with laurel leaves.

"I don't think Captain Crofton considers himself a hero at all," said Vinny as she looked doubtfully at it. "He has come home without a V.C., Miss March."

"He may not wear a Cross on his breast," responded Miss March; "but he bears the impress of it on his face. I take it he has conquered a woman's heart, which is not to be had lightly, and maybe would never have been had at all in this case, if his valour and self-sacrifice and gallant wounds had not helped his cause greatly."

Vinny said no more.

Lord Bannister and his daughter, and one or two intimate friends were the only guests invited outside the family. Elsie's fiancé came down from town with Vinny's husband. Duke had a brother officer, who had been like himself invalided home, as his best man.

The morning dawned as fair and bright as it could be.

Vinny came in and insisted upon dressing the bride. She stood over her with tearful eyes at the last.

"You are sure you will be happy?" she said, and the wistful yearning in her voice checked the smile that was on Olive's lips.

"I have no fear," was the quiet response, "I trust Duke implicitly."

"Don't place him on too high a pedestal," said Vinny, "it is unfair to any man to expect perfection!"

But Olive's face, as she sat by her casement window in her white satin draperies, was so dreamy and sweet, and her eyes, wandering away over the fair country outside, shone with such a radiant brightness that Vinny forebore to say a word more. She left her alone, and when next she saw her standing in the chancel of the church by her bridegroom's side, the look of quiet peaceful content on her face brought comfort to her anxious heart.

"He is a good man and will never disappoint her," she murmured.

Of course Ida was very much to the fore, and Beautiful in a new white costume, with a close silk cap to hide her baldness really looked quite presentable.

When they all returned to the Farm, and the wedding-cake was being cut, Ida, who had been wonderfully silent, now found her voice.

"Beautiful and me means to have two cakes when we are married," she announced in her clear, piping voice; "one for everybody, and one for ourselves, which we shall take away with us."

"And who will be your bridegroom?" asked Muriel amidst the general laughter.

Ida crossed over to Osmond's invalid chair and laid her small hand with a pretty grace on his shoulder.

"This is my bridegroom," she announced calmly as she faced the company. "He has promised to wait till I grow up, and I'm going to remind him very often till the time comes, in case he forgets it!"

The scene was comical in the extreme, yet it brought balm to Osmond's aching heart. He knew too well what Olive had been to him, and the blank that would come henceforth into his life. He had resisted Duke's entreaties as well as hers that he should make his home with them; he had mockingly scouted the idea of not continuing his life at the Farm; he had assured everybody who condoled with him that they were wasting their sympathy, for he was full of resources in himself, and never found an hour too long; yet the touch of that childish hand on his shoulder almost unnerved him. Just before Olive left she came down into the sitting-room in her pretty travelling dress, and found him alone there.

Shutting the door she knelt down by his couch and took his hand in hers.

"Diogenes," she said softly, with misty eyes, "give me one of your words of wisdom before I go from you. We have been very happy together, but I can never forget how much of my happiness I owe to you. You saw me in my darkest hour, and it was through you that my feet found the sure foundation. If God had never given me Duke, I should have been content. Now my cup is overflowing. What have you to say to me?"

Osmond was silent for a moment. Then very quietly the words fell on her ears:

"As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another."

And Olive joined her husband, feeling life in front of her had many possibilities.

They went to Scotland for a week or two, and then returned to Crofton Court, where old Sir Marmaduke was anxiously and eagerly expecting them. It was touching to see his affection and admiration for the young bride. He could hardly bear her out of his sight, and she at last told him laughing that her husband was getting jealous.

"Never!" said Sir Marmaduke emphatically. "Duke has not a vestige of jealousy in his disposition. I shall not be here long, my dear; you must humour the old man whilst he is with you."

One morning Olive was surprised to get a letter from Elsie in which she asked if she might come down to the Court for a few days' fresh air.

"I am tired and dazed with this first burst of summer heat," she wrote. "Vinnny has gone off to Paris for a week with Randolph. They did not want me with them. I know it is very soon to ask myself on a visit, but you and Duke are such sensible creatures that I am sure you have had quite enough honeymoon by this time."

Olive handed this to her husband with a smile. They were at breakfast, and Duke looked up when he had read it, with a tiny frown upon his brow.

"Well, what does the master of the house say?" demanded Olive.

"Your sisters are always welcome," he said gravely.

Then Olive left her seat and came round to him. Putting her hand lightly on his shoulder she said:

"Are you offended at her flippancy? Or is it that you want to keep your wife to yourself as much as possible? For I can see you do not want her here."

Duke put his arm round Olive, without replying for a minute, then he said with a little laugh:

"You have hit the right nail on the head. I don't grudge your being with my father, but I like every other bit of time to be spent with me."

Olive bent her head and kissed him lightly on the forehead. There was a glow in her eyes, as she said:

"I must teach you not to be selfish. It is only for the inside of a week."

"I am quite resigned to it."

Olive said no more, but wrote inviting Elsie to come at once.

"I wonder if Elsie is getting tired of her gay life," she said to her husband on the evening of the day before Elsie was expected.

They were sitting out in the verandah after dinner, the time of day that they both much enjoyed, as they had leisure and opportunity for conversation.

"When is she going to be married?"

"I don't know. I fancied Vinny was anxious about her when I saw her last. But then Vinny is always a croaker."

"Perhaps she knows the fellow better than Elsie does."

Olive started.

"Do you know him, Duke?"

"I have heard of him."

"Where? At your club in town?"

"He is a member of it, so I have heard his name mentioned."

"Now don't put on that wise-acre face, but tell me at once what you have heard."

Duke smiled at his wife's impulsiveness.

"You never encourage gossip," he said quietly.

"No, I hate it, and that is why I hate clubs so. The club talk must be so objectionable. But still this is different. I hope you haven't heard anything bad about him?"

"Oh no, only gossip," said Duke.

"Tell me at once."

Olive's face was stern and set. Duke glanced at her and smiled.

"You little tyrant! Am I to report all club conversations for your benefit? Well, I will not tease you. His character was being discussed, pulled to pieces in a few short, terse remarks. Perhaps he had offended the speakers, but he has the reputation of caring for more than one girl at a time. I was sorry to hear it, for it would go hard with Elsie if she were deceived in any one."

"Very hard," said Olive thoughtfully. She said no more, but met her sister the next day with hidden anxiety. At first, she laughed at her fears. Elsie was so bright and amusing, so full of town chatter, that it seemed difficult to imagine any cloud on her horizon. But after a time Olive detected a little weariness in tone, a hard ring in her voice that used not to be. Elsie caught her anxious gaze and laughed.

"Do all married people get such a look of doubt and perplexity in their faces as you and Vinny do?" she asked. "What is it that you are wanting to ask me?"

"Nothing," said Olive confusedly. "Are you glad to get out of town?"

"Yes, the heat is frightful, and no one is there now."

"You have Cyril?"

"Yes, but he has been very busy lately over some case he has in hand."

"And when are you going to be married?"

"Oh don't worry me about that." Elsie's tone was impatient. "I am not in any hurry, neither is he. I wish some one would leave me a legacy. If old maids and bachelors were really nice, they would start a fund for young married couples, and give them, say, a small income for the first ten years. It would be a great boon to many."

"I dare say it would, but they would not like it being stopped when the tenth year came."

"Oh yes, by that time the worst would be over, and they would be past caring for it."

"I thought Cyril was so well able to marry."

"Did I say he wasn't?"

Olive changed the conversation. After dinner that evening, Elsie sank into an easy chair by the open window in the drawing-room, with a sigh.

"You are fortunate, Olive."

"In what?"

"In your house, your wealth, your position."

"In my husband," corrected Olive.

Elsie laughed. "Oh yes, I will include him! So you take to your new vocation as well as you did to that of governing that naughty child at the farm? What has become of her?"

"I believe she is to have a governess as soon as one can be found. Meanwhile she goes to Diogenes for lessons, and delights in them."

"You are in for an easy, comfortable life," said Elsie after a pause. "I dare say you will have done best after all."

"I didn't think I should be here this time last year," said Olive slowly.

"No indeed. Tell me now, didn't you hate that fraud who was here? It puzzles me how you were able to come over to her if you were liking Duke all the while?"

Olive flushed at once. She was keenly sensitive about that bit of her past, and even a sister's touch was hard to bear.

She was silent. Elsie went on:

"If I were ever deceived in a man like that, or thought I was, I should go straight away and do something irrevocable. I should never look at, or think of him again!"

"Would you have remedied your case?"

"I dare say not. I should have married Colonel Holmes if I had been you. Yes, married him at once; and when Duke returned should not have looked at him!"

"Of course not. But that would have been a great calamity. You would have spoiled three lives by injured pride."

"I often wonder after all," Elsie continued, "whether a married life isn't a risky fate in these days. Men are so selfish. They have lost the old chivalry for women that they used to have, and think that ten minutes of their society is a great privilege, and to be prized accordingly!"

"I think that is only a certain type of man," said



Olive gently. "It seems to me the world is pretty much the same as it has ever been. There are bad men and bad women; but there are good ones too."

"Oh yes, I agree with you there: you and Duke superlatively good, Mark and Cora superlatively bad, Cyril and I a medium of both, Vinny and Randolph pleasant apart, unpleasant together."

"You have your old trick of generalising people," said Olive laughing.

"Yes, I find myself involuntarily doing it. After five minutes in any London drawing-room, I can generally class all the individuals off on my five fingers. The matrons with daughters: one aim, one object in their lives, and everything in their dress, their conversation, and tastes subservient to it. The young married women, and married women whose daughters are not yet out; perhaps these have the best time of all, for they are free to follow their different pursuits, whether it is catching celebrities, or dabbling in politics, or posing as philanthropists, and they can always command the attention and interest of men. Then there are the single women with their fluttering hearts and eager hopes, their keen enjoyments and bitter disappointments. And lastly the men. I class old and young together, for when is a society man too old to conquer! The lords of creation! two classes of them, the clever ones, and the fools; both acceptable, both unquenchable, both imbued with the *Veni, vidi, vici* principles!"

"Oh Elsie, you are changed!" Olive exclaimed. "Have you already adopted Vinny's way of talk?"

"Indeed I have not," Elsie said with warmth. "I love London life, but I cannot help seeing its eccen-

tricities. Now let us leave my surroundings. I want to know if any one has heard from Cora or her husband?"

"Duke wrote to them the other day. We have only had their address lately. Cora sent me a line after seeing our wedding in the paper."

"Oh do show it to me. I am curious to see it."

Olive went to her davenport.

"I don't mind your seeing it, but I would not show it to any one else."

Elsie took it and read.

MY DEAR OLIVE,

Accept my congratulations. I can fancy your stepping into the position at Crofton Court that I once occupied, with great ease and dignity, but I do not think I figured badly as a daughter of the house. I look back now with some amusement to my experiences at that time, but would not like to repeat them. Give Duke my good wishes for his future. I gave him a very bad half-hour, I know, and can see his terror-stricken face now as he realised all that I had been doing in his absence.

If I hadn't been forced by circumstances to be wicked, I think I should have liked you. But your goodness was oppressive. Still think mercifully of me. Life is a puzzle.

Your sister-in-law,

CORA CROFTON.

"I like that letter," said Elsie as she handed it back. "It is frank and honest. She was a 'puppet of fate'!"

"Poor Cora, I cannot help feeling sorry for her with such a husband. I wonder if he will ever be different."

"Never, I should say. People can't change their nature."

"God can."

"Now don't preach, Olive!"

"I am not going to, I was only stating a fact."

"A fancy, I should say."

"Is it fancy about Eddie?"

For a minute Elsie looked sober; then she said carelessly:

"Oh well, time will show. And Eddie is rather a different character to Mark."

"He was on the way to become very like him."

Duke joined them at this moment, and the subject was changed, but when Elsie had retired to her room that evening Olive said to her husband:

"Duke, Elsie is not happy. I believe Cyril is neglecting her, though she is too proud to confess it."

And then Duke, who was a man of few words, said shortly:

"She will be happier without him."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### HOME FROM THE WAR

But now shalt thou tell, while I eagerly listen,  
Of each bold adventure, of every brave scar,  
And, trust me, I'll smile, through my e'en they may glisten  
For sweet after danger's the tale of the war.

—*Sir Walter Scott.*

ELSIE was always restless and pre-occupied when the post came. She said very little to Olive about her own affairs; and when the latter suggested asking Cyril down from Saturday to Monday, she promptly negatived the proposal.

"He is too busy just now to leave town; it would be useless to ask him."

Perhaps Olive's eyes were keener than usual, but she could not help noticing that Elsie's anxiety was chiefly owing to no letter reaching her from him. And when about a week after she had arrived, the anticipated letter came, the sudden flush, and light in her eyes told Olive how much it was to her.

She opened it at the breakfast table. Olive was busy reading her own letters, and it was some minutes before she gave any attention to her sister. When she made some remark, to which Elsie did not respond, she glanced up, and was struck with the pallor of her face.

"You are not well, Elsie?" she said.

Elsie gave a little nervous laugh.

"Quite well, thank you; what was it you said? I was dreaming, I think."

She chatted away as usual, but after breakfast, slipped away to her room, and when luncheon time came, sent Baker with a message asking to be excused from coming down, as she had a headache.

Olive went up to her about an hour after. At first Elsie would not let her in, but she yielded at last, and Olive found her sitting by her writing-table at the open window.

"Why, Elsie dear, I hoped you were lying down."

"No, I have had a good many letters to write. I did not tell you, but I am thinking of going out to Egypt with Mrs. Harrison and her daughter. They asked me a couple of months ago, and I refused, but I have heard again from them and I think I shall go."

Olive hardly knew what to say. This news surprised her but she felt that more was behind it.

"Well, I suppose you must please yourself," she said at last. "How long will you be away?"

"About six months, I hope."

"And what will Cyril say?"

Elsie gave a bitter little laugh, then she handed Olive a letter.

"You will have to know sooner or later, only spare me any sympathy. It is a masterpiece of wisdom, I consider."

Olive did not require to be told the contents. She guessed at once.

MY DEAR ONE,

After sleepless nights and a lot of anxious thought, I am resolving to be perfectly frank and upright, and put the whole matter before you. I know you have thought me strangely neglectful of you lately. My heart and head have been waging war with one another,

and I have been tortured between duty and inclination. The plain fact is this. I have done you a culpable wrong by asking you to link your life with mine, when I have so little to offer you. You are young and inexperienced, and do not realise that my income is totally inadequate to our requirements. I blame myself infinitely for putting you in such a false position, but my adoring love blinded my common-sense. If I had any hope that my prospects would better themselves, I would ask you to trust me and wait. But I will not do you the injury of fettering your liberty, and letting you waste your best years in being tied to one who is not worthy of you. I release you, I give you up, for it is the only worthy course I can pursue, the only honourable one, and I can tell you it is at the cost of all my present happiness. The future looks dark, I hardly dare think of it, but,

Believe me always,

Your devoted,

CYRIL.

Olive read it through, then she laid it on Elsie's writing table in silence.

After a minute she said :

"No, I won't offer you sympathy, but congratulation on escaping such a fate."

Elsie looked up with flashing eyes.

"I was warned," she said; "he has been engaged once before; and they say an American heiress will be his next venture. Do you know what cuts me most in his letter? I think he knew it would tell. My 'youth and inexperience.' Now not another word, please. I am not in a mood to converse!"

Olive sighed as she left her. She knew what a blow this would be to Elsie's pride and sensitiveness. She felt the trouble would make her hard and bitter, yet was powerless to help her, as Elsie would not hear a word. She relieved herself by writing a long letter to Vinny about it, and Vinny wrote back saying that he ought to be horsewhipped, but that, for Elsie's sake, she was try-

ing to make people think it was by mutual agreement that the engagement was broken off.

Elsie had a strong will. There was never a trace of tears in her eyes, or a shadow of disappointment in her face at this time. In fact she seemed to gain fresh brilliancy and energy, and was full of interest about her projected visit to Egypt.

One afternoon Olive drove her over to see Osmond. He was sitting in his old position under the apple tree in the orchard, and Ida, with paint-box and paper by his side, was having a painting lesson.

As Olive sat down, she looked round her with a happy laugh.

"I don't believe I'm married at all," she said; "I feel that this is my proper place!"

Ida climbed into her lap at once.

"Can you unmarry if you want to? And begin over again? I wish you would, because I don't like you being finished up."

"But I don't feel at all finished up, you monkey! What do you mean?"

"You're married to your Prince, Uncle Humbug said. And then everybody comes to an end. Don't you understand? Beautiful and me always sighs when people gets married, because it says, 'and they married, and lived happily ever after.' And then there's no more about them. It made me quite sorry when you were married!"

"But I haven't come to an end yet," Olive said laughing, "and I feel that I have a great deal to learn, and a great deal to do before that time comes. In fact I shall never come to an end at all, Ida. I am not in a

story book. Come along into the kitchen garden with me, and we will see if those lovely golden plums are ripe. I have often longed for one this summer!"

She led the child away. Elsie was describing her proposed tour to Egypt with great animation, and Osmond lay and listened to her, noting every glance and tone in her face and voice. He could give her much information, she knew, and for some time they were deeply engrossed in the geography and history of Egypt. But gradually they came to more personal topics, and something Osmond said about Vinny drew forth from Elsie a protest.

"Vinny honestly means what she says. I don't think she believes in any one, except perhaps you and Olive. I used to laugh at her, but experience is a sharp and effectual teacher, and I am of her mind now."

"That is a pity!"

"Not at all. The pity is that one is such a fool to believe in people. It gives one such unnecessary shocks and discomfort."

Osmond was silent, then he said bluntly :

"Don't judge everybody alike. I can't hedge about, so excuse plain speaking. Of course I know your faith has been shaken in one, but he does not represent the whole human race, does he?"

Elsie winced a little, then she looked Osmond straight in the face.

"Look here, Diogenes, I know in your heart you must be feeling triumphant! Don't deny it. You remember my supreme self-satisfaction and elation with my circumstances. Now you say to yourself, 'She has found the world a sham, a delusion, she has discovered at last



that society life is hollow and unsatisfying.' And you are longing to preach to me, and to tell me to forsake my giddy round of pleasure and gaiety, and take up those things that will bring a solid satisfaction into my soul! Now isn't this an exact description of your feelings?"

"Something like them, I own!"

"Well, I tell you that I am not a bit tired of 'the world' as you good people call it. I am sickened of a certain class of men; but my world is not made up of men and women alone; I have other things to amuse and interest my mind!"

There was a hard defiant ring in her voice. Osmond said nothing for a minute, then he remarked gently:

"I am glad you have so many interests. You will find you will want increasing stores of them as time goes by."

"Why?"

"Because they will keep failing you. You will grow beyond them."

"You have a good opinion of my capabilities!"

"I think your soul will die hard!"

"Diogenes, what extraordinary things you say!"

Elsie was startled at last. She was very miserable, poor girl; and Osmond's quick eyes perceived that under all her stony indifference, her heart was aching with doubt and disappointment.

"Am I mistaken in thinking that you have one?"

Elsie was dumb.

A long silence ensued, and then as Olive and Ida were heard returning, he wrote something on a piece of paper and slipped it into her hand.

"Read that to-night before you go to sleep."

"Is it a bit of your philosophy?"

"No, something much better. It is a description of a life like yours and the result of it after a few years."

Elsie pocketed the paper. Her sober mood was gone, and for the rest of the afternoon she laughed and talked as if she were without a care.

But when she went to bed that night she had the curiosity to unfold the paper.

"I suppose it is some text," she said, and these were the words that confronted her:

"Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little, ye eat but ye have not enough; ye drink but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages, earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." "Thou sayest . . . I have need of nothing!"

She folded it up thoughtfully.

"A cheerful verdict on my life," she muttered; "I am afraid I am beginning to find that 'I have not enough!'"

She went abroad, but a little seed had been dropped into a soft bit of ground, and though hidden, and nearly choked for many a long day, did eventually spring up, and bear fruit.

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The war was virtually over. England had given and done her best in the great struggle for supremacy. The future will alone tell what a blessing British rule, with its impartial justice and freedom, will be to black and white, to poor and rich in South Africa. Christians and philanthropists must rejoice in the opening up of many dark tracts for missions and civilisation. But with the affairs of South Africa we have not to deal; only with

a bright gathering at Crofton Court to welcome a young hero home from the war.

It was strictly a family gathering ; yet Lord Bannister and his daughter were among the invited guests.

"Old friends are as near and dear as relations," said Olive, when Muriel ventured to suggest that they might be in the way. "And Eddie would expect a welcome from you, Dot."

Muriel was not so ready to laugh at this notion as she would have been formerly. She had followed the fortunes of many of her friends out at the front through that terrible year, but none of them with such intense interest and anxiety as she had the gay boyish subaltern on "special service." She had seen his name honourably mentioned in more than one dispatch, and quite recently had read with breathless heart-throbs the account of a gallant action, which had resulted in his being sent home with a wounded leg, and named for a V.C.

"Is he much altered, Olive ?" she asked with apparent carelessness.

"I think he is, but will leave you to form your own opinion."

They were now all grouped together in the drawing-room after dinner. Elsie was the only absent one. She was still in Egypt. Osmond was lying on a couch ; Vinny sat by him, looking sweeter, and perhaps a little sadder than ever. Her husband was talking to old Sir Marmaduke who had just been wheeled into the room by his attendant. Lord Bannister, Duke and Eddie were having an animated discussion on the virtues and vices of Tommy Atkins "under fire," and the ladies were offering their opinions freely.

As Muriel looked at Eddie, she saw what Olive meant when she said he was changed. The sunny-faced, gay-hearted boy was gone, and in his place a man with grave stern lines about his face, had returned. Yet his smile was as sweet, the light in his blue eyes as true and bright as ever.

"I wish," said Olive presently, letting her gaze rest rather wistfully on her husband's tall figure, "that Duke had come home with a V.C. I am sure he deserved it!"

Duke gave one of his hearty laughs. "V.C.'s are very plentiful at present," he said; "but there would not be a man without one if it were left to their relatives' judgment."

"Ah well," said Eddie turning to his sister. "You have right on your side, Olly. I saw a fellow in Duke's battery a short time ago who told me he ought to have had the V.C. three times over; only he did everything in such a quiet way, that unless there was an eye-witness it did not eke out. My own opinion is that a V.C. is just chance. I happened to drag one of my superiors out of a hot corner, when the General's eye was on me. It was no more than fifty others had done again and again, but if no one had seen them, no General had been by to jot it down in his note-book, it would have gone for nothing—as far as the honour and glory of it was concerned! I suppose it is the way of the world; some come in for the cream, others have to content themselves with the skim. I came home with two men both invalided. One told me his father was preparing a regular ovation at the family place, triumphal arches, village holiday, and all the rest of it. He was awfully bored at the thought of it, and told me he would like to cut and

run from it all. The other fellow was also going home, he and three brothers went out. He is the only one left alive, and he said he could best have been spared of them all. His mother dreads his home-coming, and will only meet him at a gay house-party at some relative's. She does not want to be reminded of her losses, and seems to think he ought not to have come through safely if the others did not."

"What a heartless woman!" exclaimed Muriel.

"I suppose she tries to bear her trouble heroically," said Olive; "and excitement is the only thing that keeps her up."

"Have you seen anything of Colonel Holmes, Eddie?" asked Vinny.

"Yes, I felt quite queer coming across my regiment and being such an outsider. I don't know that I would have liked going back to it though. I think if you're only a sub you see more of the plan of campaign on special service. Poor old Holmes, he was in action soon after he went out, but he told a fellow I knew, that they had come out 'too late to save the prestige of the British Army!'"

"That was rather strong!" remarked Duke smiling.

"I assure you his words were to that effect; he said that it was the want of cavalry at the outset that was one of our biggest blunders, and of course all acknowledge that now. I saw him just before I started for home. He looked rather shaky himself, had had a slight attack of fever. He asked to be remembered to you all, and sent some special message to Olive. May I give it, your Grace?"

Duke nodded with a laugh.

"It was only : 'Wish her happiness from me in her married life, she deserves it.'"

Olive coloured a little ; and Vinny, feeling for her, deftly turned the subject.

Later that evening Muriel sauntered round the dusky garden with the young soldier.

"Tell me some of your experiences," she said. "I want to hear how you were wounded."

"It would not interest you," said Eddie gravely ; "and details of a battlefield are ghastly things for a lady to hear."

Muriel looked up at him with a little of her old playfulness.

"Do you know I am getting almost afraid of you ? I used to feel years older before you went abroad, as if I were a kind of mother to you, but you have grown so marvellously, that I feel a child beside you now."

Eddie smiled, not ill-pleased at this confession ; then he said with feeling :

"I was a raw youth when I went out. But I can tell you there are no raw youths left who have been through the thick of a campaign. It ages a fellow quicker than anything. You get hardened to the awful sights of suffering after a time, but it takes the life and spirit out of you, and you settle down to endure it and go through with it as cheerfully as you can."

"War is an awful thing !"

"Yes, it always will be."

There was a little silence between them, then very quietly Eddie put his hand into his pocket and took a tiny testament out of it. He opened it, and took a photograph from it, which he placed in her hand.

"My photo?" she said, blushing a little.

"Yes, it has never left me, and has been my constant companion and comfort, next to my little book."

Muriel looked at his well-worn testament rather shyly.

"How stained it is," she said.

"Yes, I was wounded on the field."

She shivered as she realised the yellow stains signified his strong young life blood.

"It's when you're meeting death every moment," continued Eddie slowly, "that you know what your religion is worth. I'm thankful I had got hold of the real thing, for I was able to pass it on to many who needed it, and that is a grand privilege."

Tears crept into Muriel's eyes.

Then Eddie put his arm round her.

"I prayed for you night and morning, darling, and kissed your sweet face whenever I felt low. Can you give me my heart's desire now that you acknowledge I have grown into a man?"

Muriel tried to answer, but she could not, and after one look at her happy, blushing face Eddie was content.

The guests had retired to their rooms. Only husband and wife remained in the empty drawing-room. They often lingered thus together, and to-night Olive seemed loth to go.

"The young hero bears his honours well," Duke said, after they had been talking a short time.

"Yes," Olive replied. "I sometimes think that this war has brought many blessings. It must have strengthened and developed many a young fellow's character, and from what Eddie says, made many a careless, reckless nature steady down and view things differently."

"Suffering and hardships are blessings in disguise."

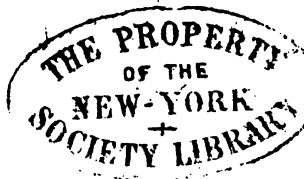
"I suppose so."

Olive looked thoughtfully at her husband as she spoke. She added, "I am so thankful that the war has not taken any of our dear ones from us. What a year it has been! How many empty homes and broken hearts. Yet we have escaped, and both you and Eddie have been brought back to us safely."

"I must thank the war," said Duke very quietly, "for touching one heart and making it miss me."

"I hope I shall never go through such a year again," said Olive, with a long-drawn breath.

"Perhaps," said her husband gravely, "it is well for us that we cannot choose our path, or know our future. 'God has His plan for every man.'"







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